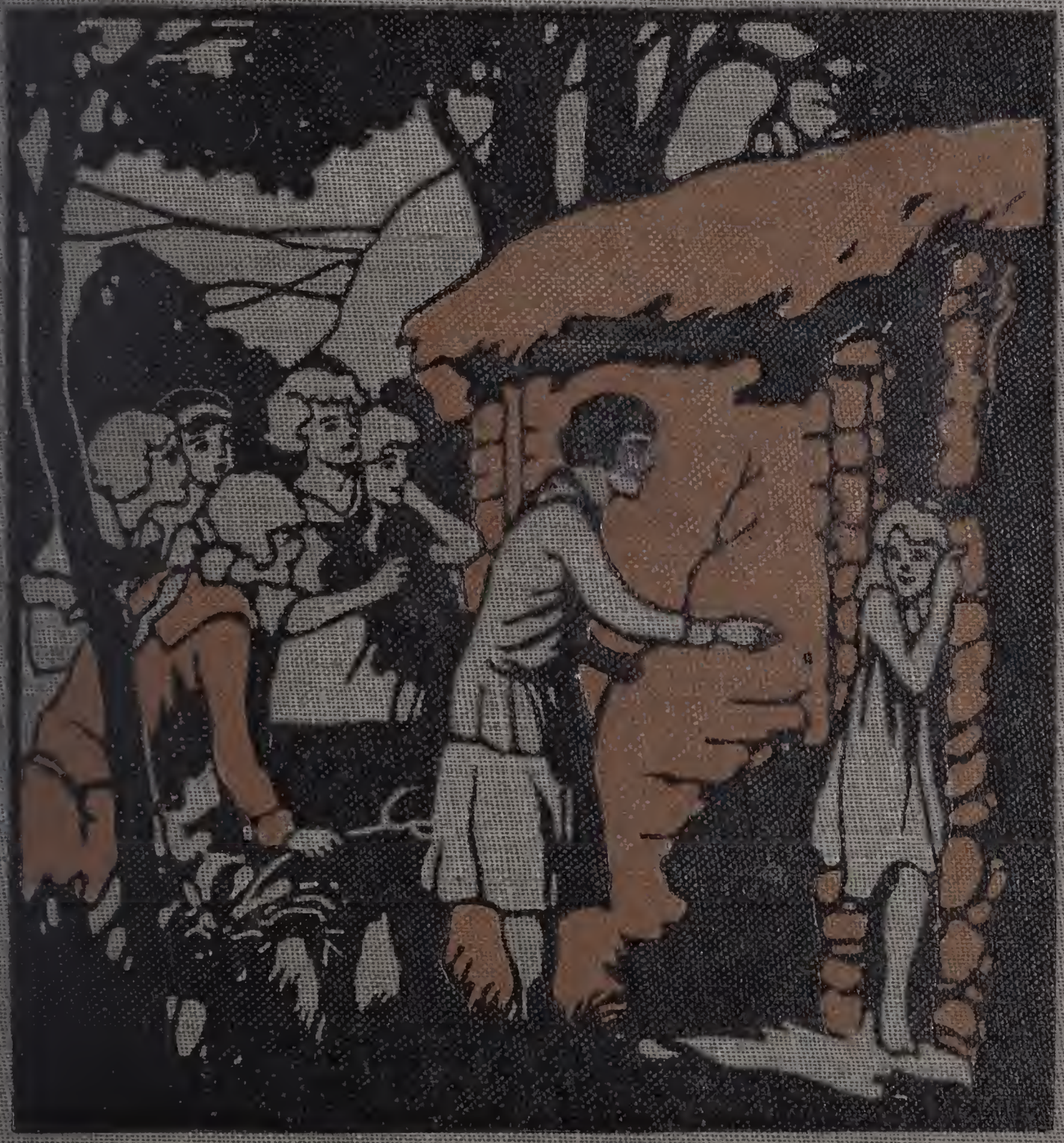
VIRGINIA'S ADVENTURE CLUB



GRACE MAY NORTH

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"I'm not scared of you," she said.
(*Page 208*) (*Virgina's Adventure Club.*)

VIRGINIA'S ADVENTURE CLUB

By GRACE MAY NORTH

AUTHOR OF

"Virginia of V. M. Ranch," "Virginia at Vine Haven," "Virginia's Ranch Neighbors," "Virginia's Romance."

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THE VIRGINIA DAVIS SERIES

A SERIES OF STORIES FOR GIRLS OF TWELVE TO SIXTEEN YEARS OF AGE

By GRACE MAY NORTH

VIRGINIA OF V. M. RANCH
VIRGINIA AT VINE HAVEN
VIRGINIA'S ADVENTURE CLUB
VIRGINIA'S RANCH NEIGHBORS
VIRGINIA'S ROMANCE

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VIRGINIA'S ADVENTURE CLUB

CHAPTER I.

THE ADVENTURE CLUB.

"Now that the Christmas holidays are over," Babs remarked on the first Monday evening after the close of the short vacation, "I mean to redeem myself."

Margaret Selover looked down at the Dresden China girl who, her fluffy golden curls loosened from their fastenings, was wearing a blue corduroy kimona which matched her eyes. Babs sat tailorwise upon the furry white rug close to their grate fire.

Megsy laughed. "Which means?" she inquired as she sat in front of her birds-eye maple dressing table, brushing her pretty brown hair.

"Which means that I have determined to startle the natives by getting my name on the honor roll. Watchez-vous me! See if I don't."

"I certainly admire your French." Margaret was donning her golden brown robe that was woolly and warm. Then, when she, too, was seated opposite

her roommate, she inquired: "But why this sudden ambition? I thought your motto has always been 'Learn as little as you can, for wisdom makes a stupid man.' "

"Well, doesn't it?" Babs flashed. "Take Professor Crowell ferinstance. He probably knows as much as the encyclopædia, and yet, who can deny but that he is stupid. He goes around ruminating on things that nobody else could understand, and he can't even tell his own daughters apart."

Margaret laughed. "Well, belovedest, I don't think you and I are either of us in danger of becoming as wise as Professor Crowell, and as for telling Dora and Cora apart—who can? Certainly not Mrs. Martin, and they've been in this school since they were small." Then more seriously, she clasped her hands over her drawn-up knees, Margaret continued: "But I would like to be as wise as Miss Torrence. When she is reading to us and there is a reference to someone or something that happened in the long ago, you know how her eyes brighten. She is seeing a picture that represents it. I know, because yesterday when I came across a reference to the Peripatetic school, I was as pleased as Punch. I knew at once that the Greek word meant 'to walk,' and that it had been used because Aristotle, the greatest of ancient

philosophers, walked up and down in his garden while teaching. And so I have decided that, if learning does nothing else, it adds a lot to one's own pleasure."

Babs glanced at the clock over the mantle. "I don't see why the girls don't come," she said, trying to suppress a little yawn. Margaret laughed and leaned over to poke up the fire. "My professorial discourse has evidently made you sleepy. Hark! I believe I hear approaching giggles."

A merry tattoo on the closed door announced the arrival of the expected guests, and in they trooped, each wearing a bath robe or warm kimona of the color which the owner believed to be most becoming to her particular type of beauty.

Betsy Clossen, in a brilliant cherry-red robe, was the first to burst in. Then, observing the solemn faces of the two before the fire, she remarked inelegantly: "For Pete's sake, who died? I thought we were going to have a giggle-fest to celebrate our reunion, after the long separation, and here are our hostesses looking as though they had just heard that they'd both failed in the final tests."

The newcomers dropped down on chairs or floor, as they preferred. Barbara continued to look unusually solemn. "That's just it," she announced. Then

to Margaret: "That's why I told you awhile ago that I mean to redeem myself. I flunked on the holiday tests, and I was the only one in our crowd who did. Even Betsy—" She paused and there was a mischevous twinkle in the blue eyes that had been serious longer than was their wont.

"Believe me, I just got through by the skin of my teeth!" that maiden announced in her characteristic manner. "Spent too much time playing detective, and failed at that, too."

"I'll tell you what!" Virginia Davis, who had been a sympathetic listener, spoke for the first time. "Let's have a study club and meet in one of our rooms every Saturday evening and have an oral review of the week's work."

"Ooh!" moaned Betsy; "that doesn't sound very interesting."

"I'm for it," Babs announced; "and when the grind part is over, couldn't we have refreshments?" This, hopefully.

"Why, of course. We are always allowed to make fudge on Saturday evening—" Virginia had begun, when Betsy put in: "Oh, I say; please change the name of it; then I'll enjoy it heaps more, if one can enjoy anything related to learning."

"Can't we think up some name that won't sound

the least bit studious? Then we can have the real object a secret."

"We might call it The Adventure Club if you would enjoy the meetings more than you would if we called it The Weekly Review." Margaret smilingly suggested.

"I'm for it," Betsy declared, then added doubtfully. "I suppose my new roommate will think she ought to be let in on it. Would any of you mind? She's not such a bad sort."

"Who did you draw, Bets? I thought you hoped you were to have your room alone this term."

"So did I, but Fate was agin' me. Just as I was spreading my duds all over the room, thinking I was to be sole possessor, along came Mrs. Martin with a roommate for me. Since Sally MacLean didn't come the first term, I didn't ever expect her back again."

"Sentimental Sally!" Babs and Megsy exclaimed in one breath. "Has she returned to Vine Haven?"

A doleful nod was Betsy's only reply. Then she laughed gaily as though at some merry memory. "I suppose you girls who don't know her are wondering why we call her 'Sentimental Sally,' and so I'll tell you."

"Well, proceed. We're all ears, as the elephant's child was once heard to remark," Barbara said as she

leaned back against Virginia, who sat in the easy willow chair.

"Is this Sentimental Sally, silly?" Virg inquired.

Betsy laughed. "Silly?" she repeated with rising inflection. "She's worse than that. She's bugs! Or rather, she was. I sort of think she's cured. Time alone will tell."

"Sally is always in love or thinks she is, which is perfectly ridiculous," Margaret explained, "since she is only fifteen."

"I've sometimes thought that if Sally had had brothers, as we have, she wouldn't have had such foolish notions," Barbara remarked. "You have the floor now, Betsy, tell the girls the woeful tale of Sally's downfall."

"Well, to begin at the beginning, Miss Snoopins, otherwise known as the Belligerent Buell, is death on members of the sex not fair."

"Meaning boys," Barbara put in.

"One of the rules that she made for the corridors was that no photographs of the objectionable creatures should be displayed in our rooms. Well, as usual, Sally was being sentimental about somebody, and the somebody was certainly a most good-looking boy. She called him 'Donald Dear' and raved about him whenever she could find anyone to listen.

"Of course she wanted to have his photo in her room, but that was against the rules, so she got around it in this way. Her grandmother's picture was in a frame that was suspended between two little gilt pillars and could be swung over with the back to the front, so to speak. Sally fastened her Donald's picture back of her grandmother's photo, and when she was all alone in the room, the boy smiled out at her, but when she heard footsteps in the corridor, she darted to the mantel and turned it over that her grandmother's face might be the one to greet whoever was about to enter. In this way Sally evaded Miss Snoopins for a long time, but we knew that a day of reckoning would surely come. Nor were we mistaken.

"We were all in her room on Thanksgiving. Maybe I ought to be ashamed to confess that, silly as we thought her, we were willing enough to partake of the spreads that came to her from a doting mother on any and all holidays. Sally is good-natured and she just adores me. Not much of a comp, considering her lack of brains, but anyway when we got a bid to her room for a Thanksgiving spread, we were all there, Megsy, Babs, Dicky Taylor and the present speaker. The craziest part of it was that we might have had that spread early in the evening, with permission, if we had wished, but that wouldn't have

been romantic enough to suit Sally. She wanted to wait until the lights-out bell had rung and then, when Miss Snoopins had passed down the hall, to be sure that the gong had been obeyed, she wanted us to all steal into her room, which we did. Sally then locked the door and hung a towel over the keyhole and drew the rug over the crack at the bottom. We forgot that light might also shine through the crack at the top. Then Sally lighted her prized candlebra and set it on the floor in the middle of a big paper table cloth. Oh, baby, it makes me hungry now to think of that spread. Say, Babs, do you remember how tender and juicy that turkey was? Yum! And those cranberries?" Megsy and Barbara nodded. Virginia smiled. "I've read boarding school stories," she said, "and there was always some such prank. I suppose that just as the feast was about to be eaten, there came a knock on the door and—"

But Betsy shook her head. "No, not that soon, thanks be. We had the turkey devoured even to the bones and were starting on the dessert, when Sally happened to look up at the mantle. If there wasn't the kindly-faced old grandmother smiling down at us. For once Sally had forgotten to turn it over. Up she sprang and 'Donald Dear' beamed out. Then, to prove just how sentimental she really was, Sally

lighted two tiny candles, one on either side of the frame.

"He certainly was a handsome chap, and we all talked about him as we ate the delicious pumpkin pie. We asked Sally where she had met him, how old he was and if she were going to marry him when she grew up. She said yes indeed, that they were engaged and that he just adored her. The only reason that he didn't write to her every day in the week was because pupils at Vine Haven weren't allowed to have letters from boys. Of course we knew that. Now I happened to remember something which was, that the first time that Sally had told me about Donald, she had said that he was a class-mate of a boy cousin and that she had met him at her aunt's summer home, but that night she told the girls that she had met Donald at a dance when she was visiting in Boston. Of course, being the daughter of the most famous detective that ever was, I noticed that discrepancy, though none of the other girls did, and I got suspicious at once. If Sally didn't know where she had met the handsome Donald (we all agreed he was that), the question was had she really met him at all?

"However, I didn't want to spoil the spread by asking any embarrassing questions, but you know how tickled I was to have something to detect. Well,

I was just eating my last luscious bite of mince pie when I pricked up an ear, so to speak. 'Hist!' I whispered, holding up one finger. 'Didst hear a prowler?' The girls all sprang up on the alert.

"Of course we expected Miss Snoopins to appear and were prepared for the worst."

The narrator paused to be sure that she had properly aroused the curiosity of her listeners, and then she continued: "There was no mistaking the fact that there were footfalls without, then a voice said: 'Open the door, young ladies, if you please.' And it wasn't the voice of Miss Snoopins. It was no less a personage than Mrs. Martin who stood there when the door was opened. Sally had at once darted to the mantel to reverse the picture in the swinging frame, but we made no attempt to hide the feast. It just couldn't be done. My! but weren't we skeered! We were sure we'd all get our walking papers, but though Mrs. Martin delivered a short lecture on setting an example to younger girls, she said kindly: 'This was absolutely unnecessary, Sally, for you know I am always perfectly willing to permit you to share the box of good things that your mother sends you.'

"Miss Snoopins, who of course had brought Mrs. Martin, stood back of our beloved principal and she

fairly glared at us. One could plainly see that she was boiling within and more than ever wrathful because Mrs. Martin was not severe. Suddenly her X-ray glance, which had been sweeping over the floor with its evidences of guilt, chanced to fall upon the mantel. Into the room she strode, looking like a caricature in her flannel nightie, her skimpy kimona and her flapping bedroom slippers. Never before had her nose looked so long and peaked or her thin hair so tightly drawn back. When Sally saw the direction she was taking she looked, and to her horror she beheld that in her haste she had whirled the picture over twice, and that Donald dear was again smiling down upon the company.

"Mrs. Martin, having asked us to promise that we would obtain permission to have a feast, in the future, had retired and so she did not hear or see what followed. Miss Snoopins' green eyes fairly snapped. 'Sally MacLean, is that a boy's picture?' she demanded.

"There being no answer needed, Sally gave none, but she felt like crying, she said, when the belligerent Buell snatched it from the back of the frame to which it had been pinned and tore it into shreds. Even the pieces she thrust into the pocket of her kimona. 'One hundred buttonholes in garments for the heathen,'

she said in no quiet voice. In fact, all the girls on our corridor were awakened, and the first to thrust their heads in at the door were Dora and Cora Crowell, and weren't they mad when they saw that we had had a feast and that they weren't in on it, but they were all back in their rooms before Miss Snoopins left which she did after ordering us out and watching us go.

"Sally said she cried all night. She didn't care to live without a picture of her dear Donald. I said her cousin could send her another picture of his roommate, but she didn't reply. However, she looked so sort of queer that I was more than ever sure that she was just using her imagination.

"Nothing happened until Valentine's day, and you remember, Megsy, that Mrs. Martin said that Benjy Wilson might bring over a few of his friends from the Drexel Military Academy to call and that one of the teachers, Miss King, if she were free, would act as chaperone.

"That was a great occasion for the girls. Mrs. Martin excused us from classes, as the calls were to be in the afternoon and Miss King took that opportunity to drill us in how to receive visitors. After half an hour of practice we skipped up to our rooms to get ready. We put on our prettiest white dresses

with gay colored sashes. Margaret and Babs were to pour chocolate and Sally and I were to pass plates of wafers. This reception was for all of our sophomore and senior girls. Of course, Sentimental Sally was more excited than any of the rest of us, although we were all interested. It was a pleasant break in the monotony of school life. Eleanor Pettes had a single room at the front of the house last year, and just as we were all dressed and waiting for a signal to call us downstairs, Eleanor beckoned and we flocked to her room. 'Here they come,' she whispered, as though they could hear, 'and don't they look handsome, all of them in blue and gold dress uniforms.'

"They certainly did. There were about fifteen boys walking two by two with Sergeant Hinkle, one of the seniors, in charge. Sally had been at her mirror arranging her yellow curls in just the right places, and so she hadn't looked out the window, but she was ready a second later when Miss King appeared to lead us downstairs.

"The boys were standing about in the library looking at the books on the shelves or pretending to when we entered. Miss King spoke first with Sergeant Hinkle, and then we were all introduced in a rather general way, and we stood about talking in groups. I said to Sally: 'There are two boys over by the

window and they look lonely. Let's go and talk with them.'

" 'All right,' Sally agreed, 'you lead the way.'

"Sally, followed as I wedged through the groups, but when we got there we found only one boy who stood with his arms folded looking about the room with rather an amused expression on his really good-looking face. He turned toward us questioningly for Sally had uttered a little cry of amazement and had put her hand to her heart.

"Of course, I had recognized the boy at once. He was Donald Dear! He looked at us pleasantly, even curiously, as he noted Sally's very evident agitation, but it was perfectly plain to me that he had never seen either of us before.

" 'What did Sally say?' Virginia inquired.

" 'She didn't say—she bolted! She went up to her room and when the callers were gone I found her there in tears.'

" 'She said that we'd all think she was a fibber, and that's what she really had been, for she hadn't the least idea who the boy was in the photograph. She just knew that he was a football player whose picture was among a lot that her cousin had brought home from school. She said she was just crazy about him and always would be.'

"'Did Sally ever see him again?' Virg inquired.

"'No, I guess not. Benjy said that Donald Dearing went to France soon after that to be with his father, who was stationed there.

"Margaret looked meditatively into the fire. 'If only girls knew how much more boys like them when they are not sentimental.' she said, 'they would all try to be just good comrades.'

"'Sally didn't return to Vine Haven the next term,' Betsy continued. 'Honestly, I felt sorry for her, and so I wrote her a Christmas letter and told her the girls didn't hold it against her because she had used her imagination. She was so happy to get that letter and she packed right up and came back to school.'

"'Poor girl!' Virginia said kindly. 'Do bring her to the meetings of The Adventure Club. Perhaps it will do her a lot of good. Don't you think so, everybody?'

"Babs and Margaret nodded. 'I always liked Sally, and I'm pretty sure that she won't be sentimental again,' Megsy replied.

A get-ready-for-bed gong was pealing through the corridors and the girls arose. "This is Monday," Babs

announced. "I'm going to study like a good one, so I'll know every question asked me at the Saturday Evening Review."

CHAPTER II.

SENTIMENTAL SALLY.

Sally MacLean entered Barbara's room almost shyly on the following Saturday evening. She was pleased because Betsy had invited her to attend The Adventure Club's first gathering, but remembering her humiliation of the year before, she was not sure how she would be received.

But the old pupils acted just as though nothing had ever happened and Virginia welcomed Sally, whom she had not chanced to meet since her arrival, in her friendliest manner.

"Shall we begin the review at once?" the older girl asked. "Oh, dear me, no!" Betsy protested. "If this is going to be a club, let's elect officers and frame rules, if that's what it's called, and choose a motto an' everything."

"I choose to be committee on refreshments," Babs sang out.

"I choose to be club detective," Betsy put in.

"I vote for Virginia for president," Margaret said.

"Second it! Third it! Fourth it!" came a succession of merry voices.

"Winona you may be secretary and I'll be treasurer if there is to be anything to treasure." Margaret happened to glance at the slight girl who sat somewhat in the shadow.

"Draw your chair into the firelight, Sallykins," she called pleasantly. "How can you expect to be elected to an office if you're out of sight." The youngest member drew her chair forward, and when the flood of light from the student lamp fell upon her doll pretty face and her long yellow curls that hung to her waist, Virginia, for the first time, had a real opportunity to observe her.

"Poor girl!" she thought. "She has been too much petted and pampered by a rich mother, I guess, to develop any real character. How pretty she would be, with those dark blue eyes and long curling lashes, if her face wasn't so weak. Perhaps the club will be able to help her.

Virginia's meditations were interrupted by Margaret, who was asking, "Every one of us is holding an office except Sally. What can she be?"

"I choose her for my assistant," Virg said.

"Whizzle! What an honor! Sal, think of that

for dizzy soaring. Up from the common ranks all in a jiff to vice president."

Sally flushed, looking prettier than before. "I never do know, Betsy," she said feebly, "whether you're making fun or not."

Margaret intervened. "Just decide that she always is," she suggested. "I never knew Betsy Clossen to be solemn."

"Then Mistress Megsy, you're going to have a brand new experience, for I am going to be solemn five minutes by the clock." Turning to Virginia she asked, her expression as big-eyed and serious as she could make it, "Madame President, we have two objects for this club, one to study and one to eat. We have each been appointed to an office of honor. It merely remains now for us to select a fitting motto."

Virginia smiled and the other girls laughed, but Betsy looked reproachfully from one to the other and they could not make her change her solemn expression. "Everybody think a moment," Virg suggested, but almost at once Babs sprang up and clapped her hands. "I know where there are steens and steens of mottos, any one of them would do."

"Where?" Megsy inquired.

"On my motto calendar. I'll tell you what, Virg.

You select a date and I'll read the motto that's under it."

"Well, then, January fifteenth, which is today."

Barbara skipped to her bird's-eye maple writing desk and read from the small pad calendar.

"Do the work that's nearest,
Though it's dull at whiles.
Helping when you meet them,
Lame dogs over stiles."

Virginia smiled. "That's excellent," she said, "and let's begin to put it into effect. To do the work that's nearest, Babs, please hand me that pile of books yonder and I'll begin the weekly review."

"Ooh!" Betsy sank far down in her chair and looked so despondent that the others laughed. "Let's get this part over as quickly as ever we can," Barbara begged. "I'm almost famished for fudge."

The review that evening proved two things to the president of the club. One was that Barbara had really studied during the week that had just ended and her pretty flushed face and eager way of answering showed that at last she was really interested in learning.

But when Sally was asked to repeat William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis," the poem that all of the

girls in Miss Torrence classes were required to memorize soon or late, that doll like little maid became so confused that Virginia quickly realized that she had no understanding of what the lines meant.

"Girls," Virginia said, looking at the others rather than at the embarrassed newcomer, there is only one real way to learn poetry, I think, and that is to first picture what it means. When we thoroughly understand the sentiment, we can far more easily memorize the words of the poem." Then very kindly, "Sally, what picture came to you when you recited the lines

"To him who in the love of nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings with a mild
And healing sympathy that steals away
Their sharpness ere he is aware."

There was an almost startled expression in the baby blue eyes that turned toward the speaker. "Why, I don't believe I saw any picture. I was just trying to remember how the words came."

Margaret spoke. "Virginia," she said, "those lines always mean one thing to me. When father died, I

felt as though I could not stay in the house. The very walls oppressed me and so I ran away to a little woods that we owned and where father and I had often walked after mother left us. I had been sobbing for hours in my room and it was late afternoon when I reached the wood. I threw myself down on the moss near a little fern edged stream and though I cried at first, the gentle murmur of those great old trees seemed to soothe me and brought a peace and somehow I felt, that, though I could not see him, my dear father was still with me. Ever since then I have loved Thanatopsis and have better understood its meaning."

"Too, it is true that nature companions our happier moods with gladness and song," Virginia said. "Many a time when I have felt joyous and have galloped on Comrade across the shining desert; the shout of the wind; the frolicing of the rabbits; the very mountain peaks seemed to be rejoicing with me. Nature truly is a wonderful companion."

Sally was listening with intelligent interest. "Oh, I believe I could recite it now, Virginia. I think I understand better what it means."

And she did, no longer afraid.

That ended the review for the evening and Betsy leaped up to pass the fudge and this time she gener-

ously turned the plate so that Babs would be obliged to take the piece that was nuttiest, it being nearest her.

That night when Virginia and Winona had returned to their room, they stood for a few moments, after the lights had been put out, to gaze toward the ocean, over which hung one burning star that was much larger than any of the others.

Its path of quivering gold led toward the shore. They had opened the window and they could hear the murmurous plash of the waves on the sand, for the tide was out, and the surf was not crashing against the cliffs.

These two, who so loved and understood nature, were quiet for a time. Then Winona spoke. "Virg," she said, "I have felt a strange stirring within of late. It isn't discontent, but a soul-voice is urging me to do something really worth while."

The light had been turned on again and the girls were preparing for bed.

"What are you planning to do, Winona, that will be more worth-while?" Virginia was sure that her Indian friend had not spoken without giving the matter long and earnest contemplation.

"I do not feel that this school is just the place that I should be." Then she hastily continued when

she saw an expression of concern in the face of her dearly loved companion. "I'm not unhappy here, white Lily, but I seem to know that something else is waiting for me to do. I shall be ready when it comes."

They said no more that night as the last "lights out" bell was ringing and after that, silence in the rooms was the rule.

Virginia lay awake a long time watching the star that hung like a lantern in the bit of dark blue of the sky that was framed in her window. Her thoughts were of Winona. How calm and strong she was. She would indeed be ready when the call came to do the worthwhile thing, whatever sacrifice might be required of her.

CHAPTER III.

A SECRET ENEMY.

"Hist. Virg, hold on a minute!"

The tall slender girl warmly wrapped in hood and long cloak turned in surprise as she was about to enter the little pine wood, beyond which lay the cabin of her beloved teacher and friend Miss Torrence.

She was indeed puzzled when she saw Betsy equal-

ly well protected from the sleet and snow arise from a clump of bushes near the path.

"How you startled me," the older girl said, "with that mysterious sounding 'Hist' of yours. Do detectives always do that?"

"I don't know," Betsy confessed. "I never did hear my dad say it and he's the only detective of my acquaintance." Then stepping over a snow bank that she might stand in the shoveled path, she continued, "I wanted to waylay you. I've something to tell you. I really hate to. It sounds sort of sneaky, but we of The Adventure Club have just got to stand together and protect each other, haven't we, Madame President?"

"Why, yes. I think we should. What have you heard?"

"Well, I didn't have much of anything to do this morning, being as it's Saturday and I thought I'd go up to the Tower Room that's been vacant since Gwendolyn Laureat went away before Christmas. I never will know why I stole up those stairs as quietly as ever I could, unless it's because sleuths in the movies always do steal about that way. When I got to the top of the stairs, I saw that the door was closed. There was nothing particularly strange about that, but, just as I had my hand on the knob to turn it, I

heard voices inside. I tell you, it gave me a start! I remembered all the stories about that room being haunted and I was just about to dart away when I recognized one of the voices. The speaker stood so close to the door I could hear what she said. It was Kathryn Von Wellering and from what she was saying I knew that she is your enemy."

"My enemy?" Virginia exclaimed in surprise. "Why, what have I done to make Miss Von Wellering dislike me? All of the girls in that 'Exclusive Three' group have failed to know that I exist."

Betsy looked wise. "Don't you remember that your story was voted first place in last term's contest and that her story came out third? She had boasted about among her set that she would be the next Editress of The Manuscript Magazine and she isn't used to not having what she wants."

"Oh, that's it. But what can she do?"

"What I heard her say was that she was going to see to it that the first copy of the magazine was such a failure that Miss Torrence would gladly appoint her as Editor."

Virginia looked troubled. "I'm truly sorry about this. I never did want the position and if Miss Von Wellering really wants it, I shall be glad to give it to her."

"Well, you'll freeze, Virg, if I keep you standing out in this snow storm any longer, but I just want to tell you that I heard one of the three say that you would find, at the last minute, that your own story was the only usable contribution that you would receive."

"Why, that can't be possible. Miss Torrence told me this very morning that she would have a short story by Anne Peterson and a poem by Belle Wiley to give me before the Manuscript Magazine is made up."

"It certainly is too bad that Eleanor Pettes decided to go to college prep this term instead of coming here," Virginia sighed. "She would know just what to do." Then, brightly, "But I must hurry along. It was lucky that I started earlier than usual for Pine Cabin or I would be dolefully late."

"I'll keep my eyes and ears open," Betsy promised as she began to walk backwards toward the school. "But don't give up the ship, Virg. Stick at your post and we'll back you. Whizzle, I'll write a story myself or a poem, even, if you run short of material." Then, turning, she started to run, while Virginia continued on her way smiling, as she thought of what the Manuscript Magazine would be, if Betsy

Clossen tried to write for it. Betsy's forte most certainly was not composition.

When Virg entered the Pine Cabin whither she had gone alone to discuss the first edition of The Monthly Magazine, which had been Miss Torrence's pet hobby since she first began to teach at Vine Haven, the girl noted a perplexed expression in the eyes of her friend and teacher as she looked up from her desk that was scattered over with papers.

"Virginia," Miss Torrence began at once, "I cannot understand in the least what has happened. The story and poem that have been handed in by Anne Petersen and Belle Wiley are not fit to use. They never before did such poor work. In fact, these contributions do not sound at all like their style of composition. I was particularly anxious to have our January Manuscript Magazine an excellent one as Dean Craig of the Drexel Academy was asking me about the plan and requested that he might see our January number. He may start a similar magazine in his English classes. We surely can't use work as poor as this and there remains but one week in which to find a really excellent short story. Kathryn Von Wellering has withdrawn her story saying that it cannot be used unless she is given the position of editor."

"I'd be glad to let her have it," Virg said, but Miss Torrence shook her head. "Character as well as literary ability are taken into consideration when we appoint a girl at Vine Haven to a post of honor, and Kathryn's influence is not of the best. Well, we have a week to try to unearth a worth while story." Virginia soon left, wondering where a story was to be found. Virg thought often that snowy Saturday about what both Miss Torrence and Betsy Clossen had told her. It was hard to believe that she had a real enemy, she who had befriended everything that lived and who felt kindly toward all.

"Virg, I believe that you actually would give up the post of honor that you have won," Margaret declared that evening as she prepared for a second meeting of The Adventure Club.

"Why not?" the girl addressed glanced up brightly. "It was an honor thrust upon me, not one that I coveted. It isn't bringing me any great happiness and it has brought me an enemy. Who will, may have it, or, I mean, could if it were within my power to dispose of it, but Miss Torrence has expressed her desire that I retain the position whether or not we receive contributions considered worthy of acceptance."

"Betsy declares that she is going to submit a

poem." This from Sally who was less timid than she had been at a previous meeting. Then she tittered in a way which made her seem even more foolish than she really was. "That's why she's late. She's sitting curled up in our room writing it now."

"The Fates deliver us from any poetry that Betsy might write," Margaret had just said when there came a pounding on the door, and, clad in her cherry red bath robe, the object of their conversation burst into the room waving a sheet of foolscap paper. "It's done! The day is saved. Never before will there have been an edition of The Manuscript Magazine to contain a literary gem like this."

The other members of the study club looked at each other in mock despair. "Must we endure the torture?" Babs moaned.

"Get it over with as soon as you possibly can, if it must be done," Margaret pleaded.

Virginia interposed. "Girls, how dreadful of you! It might be good."

Betsy solemnly bowed, her hand on her heart. "Lady, I thank you for them kind words," she said. Then looking about the room, she inquired, "Where'll be the most effective place to stand?"

"I'd keep real close to the door if I were you," Barbara suggested.

"Thanks, I will, though I won't mind at all if you do pelt me with fudge."

"Indeed, not a piece shall you get unless your poetry pleases us," threatened Margaret.

Babs hastened to add, "I choose Betsy's portion for it's a foregone conclusion that she won't get any."

"Silence, young ladies, IF you please." This in exact imitation of Miss King's voice and manner. Then making another elaborate bow, Betsy began to read:

"There is a young lady named Virg.
Who said Life is surely a scourge.
I'm so witty and wise
That I must editrize
Though I'd heaps rather be hearing my dirge."

The listeners laughed while Babs clapped with her thumbnails only.

"There's a senorita, named Marguerita
And Oh-a but she's vera sweeta.
Her prida brought to her a fall
Once in a thronged study hall.
Her prida were her high-heeled feet-a.

There is a young damselle named Babs
With manners most shocking.
She grabs!

Whenever there's candy
That's anywhere handy,
The nuttiest pieces she nabs."

There is a fair maiden named Sally
Who lives in our Sweet Pickle Alley.
In front of a mirror
You oftenest see her
Whenever she has time to dally."

"There is a most witty young poet
Named Betsy, and I'm sure you know it.
She can tell by your glances,
As you listen in trances,
With a bouquet, just waiting to throw it."

Betsy ducked just in time for soft pillows snatched from the window seat were hurled at her. Laughingly she gathered them up and replaced them in a prim row, then she sank down among them as though exhausted. "Believe me, that's the hardest work I've done in my short lifetime. I'd heaps rather shovel coal for a living. I thought I could never think of a word to rhyme with Sally. Luckily we call our corridor Sweet Pickle Alley. That helped some!" Then she interrupted herself to point an accusing finger. "Quick! Look! Caught in the act. Wasn't I right

about Babs? It isn't yet time to pass the fudge and there she is helping herself to the very piece that I had intended to take, because it's so bulging full of nuts." Barbara sprang up, passed the plate and insisted that Betsy take the nutty piece. Then, as they munched, Margaret said, "I'll never forget the day I wore those high-heeled slippers. Wasn't I embarrassed, it being a reception for patrons and parents? Common sense heels for me."

The president of The Adventure Club tapped upon the table with her pencil. "Attention, if you please, young ladies," she said, "there is a matter of importance to be discussed."

The girls looked up wonderingly. "Can you all keep a secret?" Virg asked mysteriously.

"Why, of course we can." This protestingly from Margaret.

"Whizzle, what a kweestion? A bottomless well couldn't be more secretive than I am if I give my word." Betsy held up her right hand as though taking a vow.

"It won't be hard for me to keep it if I can talk it over with you girls," Barbara told them. To the surprise of the others Sally rose.

"I'd rather not try," she said, speaking more seriously than usual. "If it leaks out, you'd be sure to

think I told, so, if you'll excuse me, I'd rather not know it."

Virginia rose and placing an arm about the slender girl who had her hand on the door knob, she led her back to the group. "Sally," she said kindly, "I am sure that you will keep this secret."

The pretty face of the youngest girl glowed with happiness and pride. It was the first time since she had been in that seminary that someone had expressed faith in her. Many a time she had seen groups of girls stop their chattering when she neared and she had felt left out. "They think I'd tell what they're saying, I suppose," had been her unhappy conclusion, as she wandered away by herself feeling so alone and unwanted. But this wonderful girl, who was not only president of this little club but also editor of The Manuscript Magazine, actually wanted her to stay and share a real secret. Sally vowed within herself that Virginia would find her worthy of the trust.

"We're all bristling with curiosity, as a porcupine was heard to remark," Betsy said. "What kind of a secret is it?"

Virginia smiled at the mischievous would-be detective, as she replied: "It isn't anything that will interest you greatly. Yesterday Mrs. Martin sent

for me and asked if we girls from the West knew someone who would appreciate a term at Vine Haven as guest. Now that Gwendolyn Laureat has gone, the Tower Room is vacant. I do not know of anyone, but I said that I would ask my closest friends if she wished. Mrs. Martin agreed, but requested that we tell no one else as she never wished the identity of the guest pupil to be generally known.

The girls were silent for a moment thinking over their friends and acquaintances but finally they shook their heads. "It's just too bad," Margaret said, "I'm ever so sure there must be some talented girl who would love to have the advantages that this school offers and—"

"Such as the refining influence of the members of The Adventure Club," put in Betsy with a twinkle. "I'll undertake teaching her up-to-the-minute slang."

Megsy, not heeding the interruption, continued, "and if The Exclusive Three did not know her identity, she ought to be very happy here."

"Woe to her if they do find it out," Barbara commented. "She might as well pack up and leave that very day."

"Well, since there is no one whom we can suggest, we ourselves will not know who the guest-pupil is, as, of course, Mrs. Martin has many sources to draw

upon. Boston is full of girls, poor, but talented."

"Now, let's have our weekly lesson review." Virginia picked up an Ancient History and in the midst of moans and groans asked the first question.

"Babs, you're improving by the minute," was Margaret's comment when the get-ready-for-bed gong pealed through the corridors.

"Thanks, greatly! I mean to be a 'Shining Light' on the spring exams."

"Wouldn't you faint right on the spot if you ever saw your name on the Honor Roll board down in the main corridor?" Megsy asked.

"Would she? I'll tell the world!" Betsy answered for her. Then teasingly, "Honestly girls, you may find this hard to believe but I actually saw Babs stop in front of that popular black board every day last week to see if her name is there yet."

Barbara flushed but spunkily protested, "I don't care if I did. Now that Virg and Margaret are on it, I mean to be, too, if I possibly can."

"Well, you needn't bite my head off. Sally and I wouldn't be on it, if we could."

Then Sally surprised them all by saying, "Now that Virginia's name is there, I'd like ever so much to get my name on it, too."

"How's that for idolatry?" Betsy began to tease,

but Virginia remarked seriously, "Sally, your hardest subject seems to be algebra. I'll help you, if you wish to study after hours just as Miss Torrence helps me."

"Whee-gee!" Betsy whistled. "If Sally MacLean gets her name on the Honor Roll, it's me as will faint and I don't think I'll ever come to."

When the girls were gone, and the lights had been turned out, Margaret exclaimed, "Oh, Virg, see how beautiful the snowy world is in the moonlight. I'm so glad that Monday is a holiday. Let's go for a hike if Mrs. Martin will permit. I just adore wading through snow-drifts."

"That would be a great adventure and a new one for me," said the girl from the desert where snow-drifts are unknown. They were indeed to have an adventure.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST ADVENTURE.

"A WHOLE holiday and every hour of it free. I feel like some caged bird let loose," Margaret exclaimed as the five girls from Vine Haven Seminary started away from the school. All were clad in their

warmest coats, with leggins, mittens and flying scarfs to match the bright tams that perched jauntily atop of their heads.

"And to think that we may hike wherever we wish, on only one condition, and that to report to Mrs. Martin half an hour before lunch," Barbara chattered.

Virginia laughed. "One might think it the greatest kind of a lark just to go outside of the gate," she said. "I can understand it now, but when I remember how I have galloped all over the desert for miles without thought of keeping within certain boundaries, I don't wonder that we feel like caged birds."

"Snow birds, then," Betsy's merry face beamed out from beneath her cherry colored tam. "Sally surely is. I just adore those white furs. You look like a princess, Sal, stepped out of a fairy book with your golden curls hanging like a mantle about your shoulders."

The others laughed. "Betsy, you aren't going to burst out into poetry again, are you?"

"Not guilty!" that merry maid replied. Then pausing to look about she inquired. "Which way shall we go in search of adventure? Behind us is the sea. The wind is too icily cold to go in that

direction. Down below us is the village and beyond that—what?"

"Let's go and find out. Have we time?" Margaret consulted her wrist watch.

"Time to burn," she announced. "It's only eight-thirty. I've walked to the village in half an hour often."

"Yes, my dear, so you have, but that was in the good old summer time. You've never waded through drifts on an unbroken road and made that speed," Betsy told her, and Megsy agreed.

"Well, count an hour to reach the village. Another hour to see what lies beyond, and a third to return, and lo—that brings us back just on schedule, thirty minutes before noon."

"I'll tell you what," Virginia said brightly, "let's go as far as we can in half of our time and return on the other half. But that wouldn't do, either," she hastened to make the correction, "for it's down hill going and up hill coming back."

"Well, the sooner we get started the sooner we'll return," Barbara said wisely, "and we can talk as we walk."

Away they went, Betsy and Babs in the lead, Virginia, Megsy and Sally following single file. As they neared the top of the hill road, they heard merry

shouts and Betsy, having first reached the crest where she could look over, turned and beckoned excitedly. "Quick! There are a lot of youngsters here sliding down the hill. They've got a whopper of a toboggan. It's long enough to take us all on. Can't we bribe them to coast us down the hill? Then we'll be that much nearer the town."

"That's a spiffy idea," Babs sang out. "I brought my purse. Suppose I offer them five cents for each passenger."

"We'll make it up to you, old dear," Betsy told her, then she beckoned to a boy of about fourteen who had been whirling the long toboggan into place on the well trodden starting point.

"How much will you charge to take us down to the bottom of the hill?" she inquired. The lad touched his cap and replied most courteously, "I'll be glad to take you. I'm a Boy Scout and I do not accept pay for doing a kind deed."

"That's mighty nice of you," Betsy said. "How do you want us to sit?"

"Any way you like. I'll be in front to steer," the boy replied as he took his place.

The laughing girls thought this a fine adventure, especially Virg, who had never before been on a sled of any kind.

"All ready!" the lad glanced back inquiringly.

"Go!" Betsy shouted, and they went! There was a sudden sharp descent which gave the toboggan the start it needed. Skillfully the boy whirled it around the curve in the road that was ahead of them and to their joy the girls saw that the slide led right down to the edge of the village.

"Hurray for us!" Betsy exclaimed, when at last they had stopped.

"Thank you ever and ever so much," Virginia exclaimed, don't believe we were ten minutes coming down."

"I'll take you again any time I'm up top," the boy said gallantly. He was about to start dragging the toboggan up the long hill when Betsy hailed him. "Is there anything interesting to see beyond the village?" she asked.

The lad nodded. "I'll say there is!" he replied in a voice that suggested mystery. "There's an old haunted house on the Poor Farm Road, but I wouldn't go near it if I were you. I sure wouldn't."

Then, as some other boys were impatiently calling him to hurry up, he left the girls to ponder on what they had heard. "I'm crazy to see it," Betsy said. "We can stand far off and just look at it."

The five girls walked rapidly through the small

country village, stopping only a moment at the general store to purchase five striped bags of chocolate creams. They asked the direction they would have to take to reach the Poorhouse road. The man behind the counter looked his surprise.

"You wasn't figgerin' on goin' to the poorhouse, was you? If so, you'd better hire the station rig to tote you there. It's nigh five miles and the goin's pretty bad."

"Oh, no, indeed! We weren't going that far." Barbara turned in the door to reply.

"But thar's nothin' else on that road but Captain Burgess' old place whar thar's nobody livin'. Leastwise, no one you'd care to meet up with you a mere parcel of girls from the seminary, like as not."

But the garrulous old man's curiosity was not to be satisfied, for with a polite little nod, Barbara joined the others who were waiting on the well-shoveled path in front of the store.

The village was a small one. In ten minutes their brisk walking had taken them to the last house. Beyond that the road lay a smooth unbroken blanket of snow. Evidently the poorhouse was not often visited.

The girls stopped and looked ahead. "Is it worth the effort?" Margaret glanced up at her adopted sister. "We'll have to wade up to our knees in snow,

and we don't know how far away that old house may be. I can't see anything from here but a woods, and that's at least a quarter of a mile, shouldn't you think?"

Virginia nodded. "Fully."

"Oh, I say, Megsy, be a sport. You came all this distance for an adventure and now want to back out. I think it will be scads of fun to walk over to that woods. I'll agree to turn back there (if you'll go that far), even if we don't find the old house." Betsy seemed so truly disappointed that the others decided to go to the edge of the woods.

The cold wind which had been blowing over the bluff by the sea could not reach them in the lowland and the midmorning sun was warm, dazzling the snow.

Betsy, in high spirits, plunged ahead, making a trail through the drifts, that it might be easier traveling for the others, since she had been the one who most wanted to come. As they neared the woods the sharp eyes of the young detective made an interesting discovery. "It isn't just an ordinary woods," she turned her glowing eyes to remark. "There's a high impenetrable hedge all around it."

Barbara laughed. "How do you know it is im-

penetrable? We're too far away to be sure of that, I should think."

Betsy had started to run, having reached a place that had been swept clean of snow. "There's one thing I'm sure of," she called over her shoulders, "which is that in the middle of the woods stands the deserted house we've come to see."

When they reached the hedge and had followed around it for a time, they decided that Betsy was right. It did indeed seem to be impenetrable.

"There must be a gate somewhere! That Captain Burgess, who used to live here, had to go in and out, and I don't suppose that he jumped over the hedge every time."

"Surely not, if it were as tall then as it is now," Babs replied, amused at the picture suggested by Betsy's remark.

"Here it is! And such big iron gates as they are!" It was Sally who, having gone on ahead, turned to shout to them. They hurried to her side.

"This must have been a carriage entrance once upon a time," Virginia remarked, "but the gates are fast shut with vines now. It is plain to see that they haven't been opened for years."

The underbrush within the grounds grew higher

than the gate, and if there was a house it could not be seen.

"Hark!" the timid Sally whispered. "Didn't you hear a noise just beyond the hedge?"

"Some little wild creature, probably," Virginia remarked.

Betsy had again darted ahead of the others. There was little snow on the ground in the shelter of hedge and overhanging trees. She had been gone several minutes when they heard her shouting. "Here's a hole that's big enough for Sally to crawl through!" she said, when they reached her.

"Me? Well, I guess not! I'm not going to crawl all alone through a hole in that hedge and not know what's on the other side."

"Then I'll go myself. Luckily, I'm not much bigger than you are! If I get stuck, you all can pull me out by the legs." Betsy was about to try the experiment when Virginia detained her. "I'm not sure that we ought to go," she said. "If the owner of the estate wanted visitors, he would have left a gate open. Moreover, I think we ought to go back to school now. We'll have to climb up the hill road, you know, and we don't want to worry Mrs. Martin, who has been so kind to us."

"Oh, Virg, have a heart!" Betsy pleaded. "May-

"Oh, Virg, have a heart!" Betsy pleaded. "Maybe there's a mystery here that I could solve."

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be there's a mystery here that I could solve. I'd always be sure there was, if I went away, without even one little peek on the other side of this high hedge."

"I'll tell you what!" Babs said generously. "If we're late reaching the village, I'll hire the station sleigh to take us up to the seminary."

"And it's only quarter to ten," Margaret added, holding up her wrist watch for the oldest girl to see."

Virginia laughed. "All right, we'll stay until ten."

Although Betsy did find the hole rather small, she succeeded in wedging her way through and the other girls listened to hear what she would say, but to their surprise they heard nothing.

"Betsy, can you see a house?" Babs called wishing that she was just a little smaller that she might follow her friend.

There was no reply. What could it mean? "Where can she be?" Margaret looked troubled. "She couldn't have fallen into a hole or anything, could she?"

"It isn't likely," Virginia replied. "Sally, dear, would you mind just putting your head through and—"

But before the smallest girl had her courage put to the test, they heard someone running on hard ground; then the would-be detective pushed her way

through the hole as though she were being pursued.

"What is it, Betsy? What kept you so long. Did you see anything?" were the questions hurled at her.

"I'll say I did," the flushed girl replied inelegantly. "I saw an old circling drive and I ran over to it, knowing that it must lead to the house, and it did! There in the middle of this wood, which I suppose was only a grove when the Burgess' family lived here, there's the most fascinating old house.

"It looks ever so interesting and haunted. I do wish that we had time to go closer and examine it. I always adore reading stories about haunted houses, but I never before saw one, really."

"But there isn't time," Margaret announced once more referring to her popular timepiece. "It's ten minutes past ten. We'll have to fairly run to make it on time." But Fate was again kind to them for a boy who delivered groceries at the school was just starting up the long grade of the hill road and seeing the girls trudging along, he asked them if they would like to ride.

"Would we? I'll say we will and thank you kindly." Of course as usual it was Betsy who replied. Up into the sleigh they climbed. The boy made room for Virginia and Margaret on the wide seat but the three younger girls sat in the back dangling long legs on

which were bright colored leggins encrusted with snow.

"I'm going to sing," Betsy smilingly informed her companions. "Please don't!" the others pleaded.

"Oh, I didn't mean to do the solo stunt. Everybody, all together!" Betsy really had a sweet soprano voice and when she started a rollicking school song the others joined in repeating the chorus until they reached the kitchen door of the seminary. A crowd of girls were having a snowball game, Dora and Cora being captains of the opposing sides.

"You girls missed the fun, going off that way on a stupid old hike," Dicky Taylor, rosy of cheek and looking much like a snow girl, called to them. "Out of the way, there, or you'll be pelted," someone warned as the five adventurers leaped from the wagon. After hurriedly thanking the delivery boy they ducked into the back entry, and none too soon, for a dozen well aimed balls whizzed through the crisp sunlit air and plunked against the closed door.

Every pupil in the school was ravenously hungry when the gong called them to lunch. Betsy could talk of nothing but the possible mystery of the old deserted house."

"Just because people are not living in a house, doesn't make it mysterious," Margaret told her.

"What did the place look like?" Babs, more interested, inquired.

"Well," Betsy began, "I could tell that it had been very fine in its day but now it is dilapidated and the windows are boarded up. That proves that nobody is living in it, and, of course, if there was anyone there, the storekeeper would know it, for there would be no other place to buy supplies."

"Your evidence is conclusive," Margaret said in a tone often used by their algebra teacher.

"Virg, you don't act very much interested. Why are you gazing out of the window in that preoccupied way as Miss Torrence so often asks Megsy?"

The older girl turned and smiled at her questioner. "Because Betsy, if I must confess it, I am heaps more eager to find someone who can contribute a good story for our first edition of The Manuscript Magazine then I am to solve the supposed mystery of your haunted house. I've looked at every girl in the dining room hoping to recall some composition that I have heard read in the assembly that might suggest a story-writing talent, but I don't believe I can and since the really good story writers have gone over to the enemy's side, I may have to confess that as an editor, I am a failure."

"Cheer up, belovedest! You may find a genius in

a most unexpected place." Betsy was eager to steer the conversation back to channels of greater interest. "What I would like to know," she continued, "is how, and when can we again visit the old Burgess place?"

"Hush!" Margaret whispered. "Mrs. Martin is coming in." Instantly the chairs were pushed back, the forty-four girls rose, courtesied and then listened expectantly, for, as this was a whole holiday, they believed, and rightly, that the kindly principal had a treat in store for them.

"Young ladies," she said, "I have planned a sleigh ride party for you. Pat O'Brien and his son Micky will each drive a team and by a little crowding you can all go in the two sleighs. Every January we send a barrel of apples to the poorhouse and I thought perhaps, you would all enjoy the ride."

"Thank you, Mrs. Martin," was the enthusiastic response. Then, when they were again seated, Betsy said, "Oh, girls, how I hope I'll have a chance to slip off at the Burgess place. I'd like to prowl around there until the sleighs return."

"I'm with you," Babs told her pal.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS OLD HOUSE.

MICKY O'BRIEN drove the school bus that was now on runners and twenty-five of the warmly wrapped, hilariously joyful girls were crowded in.

A barrel of apples was strapped to each side of the bus where baggage was often placed. The big, rough farm wagon, which had been converted into a sleigh, with straw deep on the bottom of it, was filled with the primary pupils. Betsy had so arranged things that she and her particular friends were the last to enter the bus and so they were nearest the door. Too, she had asked Micky to drive very slowly when he reached the woods on the County Farm road.

Luckily Mr. O'Brien was in the lead with his load and so he did not notice when Betsy and Babs slipped out at the edge of the woods.

"I don't in the least approve of their going," Virginia said to her companion, "but I think we should accompany them. I'd be terribly worried if they went alone."

Micky, who knew that Betsy wished to remain

there until the sleigh returned, had brought his team to a very slow walk, and so Virginia, Megsy and Sally had no trouble whatever in stepping from the low step to the road. If the other girls were curious, they had no time to make inquiries for the young driver at once whipped up his horses and was soon close behind his father's sleigh.

"We must find a wider hole in the hedge if we are all to get through," Virginia remarked. Betsy, hand in hand with Babs, was wading through unbroken drifts. It was their intention to follow the hedge to the back of the large estate. Micky had told them that it would be an hour, at least, and perhaps longer, before he would be returning, and in that time surely they ought to be able to closely examine the grounds and the outside of the old house. Suddenly Betsy cried out joyfully, and turning, she beckoned to the three who were following in the track they had made.

"Goody for us!" Babs exclaimed. "One of the cypress trees in the hedge is dead and we can easily break through here."

Betsy was already doing this and in a few moments, with united effort, a narrow passage appeared.

"Ooh!" Megsy shuddered when they all stood within the high hedge. "How dismal and silent it

is, except for the sighing of the little wind in the pine trees."

"Follow me," Betsy called over her shoulder. "I'll take you to the circling drive. It's blown clear of snow and leads right up to the old house."

Margaret glanced at her wrist watch. "It's three now. In half an hour we must start back for the main road. I certainly wouldn't want to be here after dark, and the twilight comes so early these days."

"I can just imagine how lovely it must have been here once upon a time," Virginia said. "That old summer house is covered with rose vines. Can't you picture how pretty it will be in June?"

"Let's all come over and see it then, shall we?" Sally suggested.

Virginia, who had never before seen a rustic garden house, was much interested and she stopped at the open door. Megsy, Sally and Babs were with her. A rustic table with four chairs made of small trees with the bark on were within.

"Isn't it fun to think pictures?" the romantic Sally remarked. "Can't you fancy the Lady Burgess, her daughters and friends all dressed in the pretty styles of long ago as they sat about that table drinking tea?"

Margaret nodded. "I can see them, too," she

agreed, "and there's a gentleman wearing a bottle green broadcloth coat with gilt buttons and knee breeches. At least that was what my grandfather wore. He is standing up behind the ladies and passing the tea."

Virginia smiled. "And yet you won't either of you try to write a story for the Manuscript Magazine." Then turning away, she inquired: "Why, where is Betsy? She isn't with us."

That would-be young detective had not cared to linger at an open summer house, which she was sure contained no mystery (for, could not one see all that was in it at a glance?) and so she had skipped ahead. They soon found her standing in the drive gazing as one fascinated at an upper window in a big, rambling old Colonial house.

"What are you looking at so steadily?" Virginia asked. She, too, glanced up. The windows were covered with heavy green blinds and the front door was boarded up.

"I'm not so sure that the old place is deserted," Betsy said in a low voice as the girls gathered close about her. "I was positive a moment ago that I saw that upper left blind open a little, but now it seems to be fastened as securely as before."

"Betsy, you, too, must be unusually imaginative

today," Margaret declared. "If anyone were living here, why should the house be boarded up?"

"I suggest that we walk around the place," Barbara, who liked mysteries almost as much as Betsy, suggested.

This they did, but the right side of the house was so bleak as the front had been. Babs was first around the corner and she beckoned to the others. "Look!" she cried. "An old-fashioned cellar door, just the kind my grandfather had. How I adored sliding down it when I was very small. See, this one is covered with ice. Watch me while I return to my childhood sport."

Laughingly Barbara climbed up to the highest point of the sloping cellar door. Suddenly there was a crash, followed by a frightened cry. Babs had disappeared.

The frightened girls lifted the other half of the sloping door and saw Babs lying in the underground entrance to the cellar. They hurried down damp, slippery steps and lifted her. Almost at once she opened her eyes. "I'm all right," she said. "I guess this house is rather old and crumbly." She rose, and, as no bones were broken, Betsy suggested that they take a look about the cellar which lay beyond them, dark, damp and undoubtedly rat infested.

"I'd rather not." Sally hugged her white furs closely about her and shivered more from fear than cold.

"Well, then, you all stand here in the entrance," the would-be detective suggested. "I see a faint ray of light coming from somewhere off there in the darkness and I'm going to see what it is."

"I don't know as we ought to let her go." Virginia turned to Margaret. "I've read of old cisterns being in cellars."

Betsy heard and turned back to reply, "My eyes are used to the darkness now. Honest Virg, I can see where I step."

Cautiously feeling her way, she slowly advanced toward what seemed to be daylight coming through a crack under a door.

"I've reached it," Betsy sang out. They could hear her voice plainly, though they could not see her. "It is a door. Wait until I open it." As she spoke she pushed against it and the door opened silently as though it had been unlatched. Beyond was the typical stairway leading from a farm house kitchen to the cellar. A small high window in the wall was letting in a dim light.

"If one of us wasn't such a fraid cat," Betsy in-

formed them, "I'd like to climb this stairway and see where it leads."

"If you mean me, Betsy Clossen," Sally, for once, flared up, "go ahead. If Virginia isn't afraid to go, neither am I."

The girls had no difficulty in crossing the uneven cellar floor in the dim light from the stairway, but after they had glanced up and had seen a closed door at the top, Virginia drew back. "Girls," she said, "I question if we ought to prowl about other people's houses."

"But Virg, we wouldn't harm anything." Barbara protested. "Peyton is always telling of some haunted house he once visited and I've been wild to see one for myself."

After much persuasion, Virginia agreed to go to the top of the stairs if the girls would consent to go back then. "Surely the hour is nearly up and what would we do if the bus had passed and we were stranded so far from school and after dark."

The picture was not a pleasing one and Sally clung to Virginia's arm, though she would not openly acknowledge that she was frightened.

Betsy and Babs were the first to reach the top of the stairs. Barbara turned the knob and the door opened just a bit, but then closed again, and Betsy

was sure that it was being held by someone on the other side.

"How silly!" she thought. "Of course no one is holding it. Then she put her shoulder against the door and pushed with all her strength, Babs helping. The door swung open easily, but the girls were all sure that they heard soft hurrying footsteps.

"Of course it couldn't be, since the place is so plainly unoccupied," Margaret declared. "I believe that the sound we heard is the rush of snow. You remember, Micky said there would surely be a snow-storm tonight and I believe that it has begun."

They found themselves not in an old fashioned kitchen as they had expected, but in a long, wide dark hall which extended, after the fashion of Colonial houses, through the entire center with doors on either side.

It was bitterly cold and down a chimney, above a fireless hearth, the wind whistled and moaned.

"Come, we must hurry away," Virg said. "I feel just ever so guilty in having entered this house at all." Then turning to her foster sister, she anxiously inquired: "Margaret, can you see the time?"

Megsy glanced at her faithful little wrist watch. Her exclamation of dismay startled the group about

her. "It's quarter to five. The sleighs must have passed long ago."

Virginia, feeling, because she was oldest, as though she were responsible, walked quickly back to the door through which they had come. To her dismay she found that when Margaret had closed it, it automatically had locked.

They were evidently prisoners in that old deserted house. Moreover, it was bitterly cold. They would be nearly frozen if they remained there all night, and yet, how could they get away? Even if Micky O'Brien found a way to get into the grounds, they would not be able to hear him however loud he shouted.

Betsy, who had led them into all this trouble, felt properly contrite for a moment. Then she said hopefully, "Girls, Micky will surely find the trail we made in the snow and he'll follow it. That will lead him to the broken cellar door and——."

But Margaret shook her head dolefully. "Not if the snowstorm has come. Our tracks will soon be covered."

"Perhaps we can find another way out," Babs said. "I suggest that we try first one of these closed doors and then another." But just at that moment something most unexpected happened.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED APPARITION.

As Margaret advanced toward one of the closed doors, and had her hand on the knob, she suddenly sprang back in alarm, for the door had been thrown open and a young girl of their own age darted out, closing it behind her.

Then with flashing eyes, she asked, "Who are you and what right have you to be prowling about my great great grandfather's house?"

"We have no right whatever," Virginia said, "and we ask you to pardon us. We are five girls from Vine Haven Seminary, and although we really did want to see the outside of this most interesting old house, we entered it quite unintentionally."

Here Betsy, no longer willing to be kept in the background, told of Barbara's desire to slide down a cellar door, once again, as she had in the days of her childhood and of the resulting mishap.

"Of course we should have gone right back then," Margaret began hesitatingly, "but—but—well, we didn't."

To the surprise of the five intruders, the girl, to whom they were endeavoring to apologize, flashed at them a radiant smile which was like sunshine bursting through a thunder cloud. "I'm powerfully glad you did intrude," she said inconsistently. "I've been just ever and ever so eager to see some girls from the seminary. My mother and her sister used to go there when they were young and she often tells me about the good times they had. Mother went up to the seminary the year before she was married. That was when Mrs. Martin first started her school. But don't stand out here in this cold hall. Come in by the fire. Mother mine will be so glad to meet you."

"And we will be glad to know your mother, but right at this very minute we ought to be hurrying back to the school. I'm so afraid that Micky O'Brien thinks that we must have returned some other way and that he has gone on without us," Virginia explained.

Nor were they wrong, for the faithful Micky had delayed in front of the wood as long as he possibly could. His father turned often to beckon him to make haste, and when at last he obeyed, Mr. O'Brien shouted, "Aren't ye after seein' the storm clouds gatherin'? Snow'll be fallin' so thick, come any

minute, the hosses won't be seein' to kape on the road even."

Poor Micky had promised Betsy that he would tell no one, but the other girls in his sleigh were curious until one of their number said, "Why worry about them? Virginia Davis and Margaret Selover were with them. They're both on the Honor Roll and so, of course, they had permission to do whatever it was that they did. My theory is that they decided to hike back to the school. We will probably find them there waiting for us."

Micky overheard this conversation and how he did hope that it was true. Following his father's lead, he urged his horses to a gallop, hoping that they would reach the seminary before the storm broke over them. It grew momentarily darker as the clouds lowered above them and the horses lagged as they drew their heavy loads up the gradual slope of the hill road. They were just turning in between the gates of the school drive when the snow began to fall. Faster and faster, thicker and thicker the big flakes rushed, hiding everything that was a few feet in front of the bus. Even the seminary did not loom up until they were nearly upon it."

Poor Micky knew not what to do. He, of course, was obliged to go to the stables with his team after

the girls had been let out under the sheltering portico at the wide front porch. Luckily his father had made quick work of unharnessing and feeding his team, and he was in the warm rooms above the stable when Micky drove into the barn. The lad had lingered in front of the school as long as he could, hoping that Betsy or Babs would appear to assure him that they had reached home in safety, but they had not.

He was just wondering if he dared go into the kitchen and ask Delia, one of the maids who was kind to him, to obtain the information he desired, when he saw, through the storm, the figure of a girl wrapped in a long cloak and hood, hurrying toward the barn. It was Dicky Taylor. When she stepped within the light of the lantern, the boy saw that her startled eyes looked out of a face as white as the snow. "What is't?" he whispered hoarsely. "Ain't they come yet, Mis' Clossen or the rest of them?"

Dicky shook her head. "No, I'm sure they haven't. I was curious about it and so I went to their rooms just as soon as I reached the school, before I took off my cloak, but not one of them is to be found. I can't bear to tell Mrs. Martin, for, if I do, Virginia and Margaret might lose their places on the Honor

Roll. Is there any way for us to get them before supper, Micky? They won't be missed until then."

"I'm feer'd not," he replied. "It's mos' five." Then with sudden resolve, he turned his horses toward the door. "Gee, I'm glad I hain't unhitched yet. We'll take a chanct. Pa," he shouted up the narrow stairway, "Gotta go to town on an errant." He was gone, with Dicky at his side, before his father could question him further. The older man having removed his boots, had settled by the stove with his pipe. He decided that Mrs. Martin had sent the boy back on some forgotten errand and thought no more about it.

Meanwhile the girls about whom so much anxiety was being felt were talking with the young stranger who had appeared so unexpectedly.

"But there is only one way out of this old house," Eleanor Burgess told the girls when Virginia protested that they would better hasten away and return some other day to meet Mrs. Burgess, "and that way lies through the South Wing, which mother and I are occupying." As she spoke she again opened the door and the five girls caught glimpses of a pleasant fire-lighted apartment which seemed strangely out of keeping with the cold damp old house through which they had been groping until they had been suddenly

confronted, not by the expected ghost, but by an inhabitant who was a girl of their own age.

Much mystified, they followed Eleanor and found themselves in a large living room which seemed to combine within its four walls all the requirements of a home, for one corner was lined with shelves on which were many books. There, too, was an old mahogany desk littered with papers and the pencil lying upon them seemed to have been hastily dropped by whoever had been writing. In still another corner, almost screened from their sight, was a small oil stove and a few kitchen utensils, while in the middle of the room, drawn close to the wide fireplace, on which a log was burning, stood a supper table set with two places. The only light in the big room came from two candles on this table, one behind the screen and the fire on the hearth.

Easy chairs and a bed couch covered with bright colored pillows completed the furnishings. There was a charm about the room which delighted Virginia.

It was evident that someone was behind the kitchen screen, and, upon hearing her name spoken, that someone appeared, smiling a welcome to the unknown girls. A woman, neither old nor young, but

with a weary expression on a pale, though truly beautiful face, advanced with her hand outheld.

"And who may these maidens be?" The question was smilingly directed to her daughter, whose flushed cheeks and bright eyes revealed that she was both excited and happy about something.

"Mother mine, these are five girls from the seminary about which you have told me so often." Then impulsively turning to the girl nearest, she said, "This is my lady-mother, Mrs. Burgess. Won't you please tell her your names? I simply can't remember them."

"Gladly," Margaret replied, then when the introductions were made, she looked anxiously at her foster-sister, saying, "It is five now. What shall we do? Micky has of course driven past, and do see the snow storm!"

She glanced at the window, against which sheets of hail and snow were beating.

"Mrs. Martin will indeed be anxious," the mother said. "Otherwise I would suggest that you remain here and camp out with us."

"Oh, how I wish you could," Eleanor exclaimed. "We would spread blankets on the floor near the fire and pretend we were sleeping on the ground on a summer's night, out under the stars." At that mo-

ment the wind whistled dismally down the wide chimney and Virginia smiled. "We would have to have good imaginations to pretend that, I fear," she commented.

"My little daughter has a very wonderful imagination," the older woman said as she pointed toward the old mahogany desk. "Instead of moping because she is shut in with a weary invalid, as many girls would, she spends hours scribbling. What she is writing she will not tell, but I believe that it is a story."

Virginia's eyes brightened. "Oh, is it truly? Do you write stories?" Then when her question had been answered with a nod, she continued, "I have been made Editress of The Manuscript Magazine, much against my will, and I am searching for someone who can write an interesting story. If you love to write, then of course you write well. How I do wish you were a pupil at Vine Haven."

"And I, too, wish that she were, Virginia," the mother replied sadly, "but I have been obliged, through ill health, to give up my settlement work in Boston and come back to my great grandfather's old home to recuperate. Our income at present is barely enough to provide our daily needs and the tuition at the seminary in high."

A sudden memory brought a rush of gladness to the heart of Virginia. Only a few days before Mrs. Martin had asked if she knew of a really talented girl who would benefit by becoming the guest pupil and occupying the Tower Room left vacant by the departure of the former guest pupil. Surely nowhere could be found a girl more worthy of this privilege. But of her thoughts she said nothing just then. She must first consult Mrs. Martin. "Mrs. Burgess," she said, "what would be your advice to us? Shall we start out in the storm, endeavor to walk into town and there hire a station wagon to take us up the hill, or—"

The query was interrupted by a jingling of sleigh-bells without. Micky had chanced to see the light from the kitchen candle glimmering through the storm and had driven toward it, finding a gate open on the side which the five girls had not visited, and so it happened, in another moment, he was pounding at the door, which, when opened, admitted a gust of sleety wind and revealed Dicky Taylor's white, troubled face and that of the Irish boy.

"Do come in and get warm, both of you," was Eleanor's urgent invitation, but the boy shook his head. "We mustn't stop. We're afther wantin' to get back before six."

"I'm coming again tomorrow if possible," Virginia said before she left.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RESCUED CULPRITS.

"It's all my fault! I'm going to take every bit of the blame," Betsy declared. The six girls were huddled in the shelter of the bus while faithful Micky, up on the storm-beaten high seat, steered as best he could the weary team through the drifts and the blinding snow.

"It's not all your fault," Virginia declared stoutly. "I knew that you planned leaving the bus to visit the old house and I should have advised you not to."

"You couldn't have stopped us, I mean me," Betsy declared. "I've been foolishly headstrong. You did say that it was unwise but, of course we didn't know we were going in."

Barbara laughed. "I'll say I didn't. I never was so surprised in all my life as I was when I DID go in."

"What happened?" Dickey Taylor inquired. Then, when she had been informed, she added: "Oh, how

I do wish I had been there. Next time, take me, please do! I adore adventures."

"Girls, it has stopped snowing. Whizzle, but I'm glad!" Betsy announced.

"What's more the clouds are parting and the moon is coming through. Now poor Micky will be able to see where he is driving." This from Megsy.

"Girls," Barbara put in, "that Irish boy is as faithful a friend as anyone could find on top of this earth. I wish we could do something nice for him. Is there anything he wants that anybody knows? If there is, we rescued ones might chip in and give it to him."

"Babs, you've known him longest and you're really the lady of his heart, so suppose you find out and then we're with you on the coin part of it," Betsy said in a low voice, although her words could not possibly have been heard by the boy who was whistling to keep up his spirits and perhaps to hearten up his lagging team.

"Virg, what are you thinking of so intently?" Dicky Taylor asked.

The older girl replied: "Of the one room home that we just left, I was wondering about that lovely mother and daughter. How strange, that they should be living in that old tumble down house and yet the storekeeper in the town know nothing of it."

Betsy was on the alert at once. "It's a mystery," she announced. "I just knew there would be a mystery in that old house."

Barbara laughed. "Wrong you are! Eleanor told me how it happened, and it is not at all strange. Her mother is a settlement worker, and she has been giving more strength than she could spare to nursing, in the tenement district through some epidemic, and when it was over and many lives saved through her efforts, the physician in charge said that Mrs. Burgess must have a month's complete rest. He asked where she would like to go, and she told him of that one wing which she and Eleanor had fitted up several summers ago for their vacation retreat, and so he brought them in his big comfortable closed car just before the snows came, and he also had supplies sent from Boston, enough to last the entire month they are to be there. In another fortnight that same physician is to return for them, and as almost no one travels the County Farm road in the winter, they may be gone, and that garrulous old storekeeper may never know that they have been here at all, at all."

There was a wide canopy of star and moonlit sky above them as the bus turned in again at the school drive. "Shall you all slip in up the back way to

your rooms? There's time to dress before the supper gong rings," Dicky Taylor said.

"Why, of course not," Virginia replied. "If the rest of you are willing, I would like to be the one to tell Mrs. Martin all that has happened."

"Oh, I say, Virg!" Betsy began; then added, "Why tell, if we wouldn't be found out? We didn't do anything so terrible. You know this was a free day and Mrs. Martin herself said that we might hike anywhere we wished this morning."

"I do not expect Mrs. Martin to rebuke us," the oldest girl said, "but I do want to tell her about Eleanor Burgess."

"Oh, I know! You're thinking she might become the gu—" Sally clapped her hand on her mouth. She, who had vowed never to betray that secret, had nearly told. It wouldn't have mattered if their own group alone was present, but Dicky was with them. Luckily, the bus was at that moment stopping under the portico. Betsy said: "I understand, Virg! Do whatever you think best, and remember I consider that I am most to blame. I'll never forgive myself if you and Megsy have your names taken from the Honor Roll."

"If they don't deserve being there, we want them off," Margaret said quietly.

Micky grinned his pleasure when Babs told him that he was just like the chivalrous knights in the stories of long ago. When they entered the main hall of the school, Virginia saw that a card hung on the principal's door. "Occupied" was the one word printed thereon, so Virg hastened upstairs with the others to prepare for supper.

Directly after the evening meal, Virginia left the other girls in the big comfortable school library where a log was burning on the wide hearth, and where they were planning to do reference reading. She told them that she would return as soon as possible and tell them just what Mrs. Martin thought of the plan that she had to suggest.

The kindly woman looked up expectantly when, in reply to her invitation to enter, the door of her office opened.

"Oh, good evening, Virginia," she said, motioning to a chair near. "Be seated, dear. Isn't it curious that right this very moment I was thinking of you, wondering if you or your friends had thought of someone whom we could invite to occupy the Tower Room. I do not like to delay longer, as the term will soon be well started." Then she paused and observed—"Virginia, I am convinced by your eager expression that you are just waiting for an oppor-

tunity to tell me something that has greatly interested you. What is it?"

"You are right, Mrs. Martin," the girl declared as she seated herself on the straight backed chair near the principal's desk. Then she hesitated. "I hardly know where to begin," she smilingly confessed.

"Suppose you begin at the beginning," was the amused comment of the older woman.

"Well, then, you know Mrs. Martin, that this morning you gave us all permission to hike wherever we wished until noon. Our group of five were taken by a very nice boy, of perhaps 14, on his toboggan to coast down the long hill that leads to the village. When we reached the bottom, we asked him if there was anything interesting to be seen beyond the town. He told us about a house which he called haunted that had one time been occupied by a Captain Burgess and his family."

Mrs. Martin's expression brightened. "A wonderful old house that was in its day and the Captain was a most interesting character. My husband enjoyed nothing better when he was here resting from a hard session in Washington than to spend a few hours over there listening to Captain Burgess' tales of his experiences on the sea. But he was a very eccentric old man, and grew more so as the years

passed. He was determined that his two lovely daughters should never marry. His own marriage, I believe, had been a very unhappy one and when he was left alone with the two girls, he seemed to have but one thought and that was to prevent their meeting young men who might wish to propose to them. They were kept like two fair prisoners within that high hedge and when necessity compelled me to change my home into a school these two young ladies were among my first pupils, but they were always brought in a closed carriage and were to remain within the seminary grounds until they were called for. How they ever happened to meet the young men whom they married is indeed a mystery.

"One was named Eleanora and the other Dorinda. Eleanora became the wife of a young man, who proved worthless and who left her. Dorinda married a missionary and went to live in distant lands. Their father at the time was on a long sea voyage and when he returned and found that his girls had evaded the vigilance of a dragon-like housekeeper, whom he had left in charge, he became very hard and declared that not one penny of his fortune should be given to those ingrates for their good-for-nothing husbands to spend. Both of the girls wrote begging their father to forgive them. He died soon after that and he

left a note saying, 'I've buried my money. Whoever finds it can have it.'

"Luckily this note was not made public or the grounds of the old Burgess place would have been dug up long ago. It was sent to Eleanora, who had become a settlement worker in Boston. Now and then the two sisters heard from each other. They knew that Eleanora had a baby girl and Dorinda a boy. These children must be about 16 and 18 now, I should think. But here I am reminiscensing when I am quite sure that you have something that you are eager to tell me. Has it aught to do with the old Burgess place?"

Virginia replied that it had, and then she told all that had befallen the group of girls who had started out that morning in search of an adventure. Although she took a full share of the blame for having left the bus, Mrs. Martin seemed to heed not at all. Her face plainly told the anxious watcher that the misdemeanor was not of sufficient importance to be rebuked, while, on the contrary, the news that her one time pupil, the lovely daughter of old Captain Burgess was again at Vine Haven pleased her exceedingly.

"As you say," she began, "the daughter, Eleanor, would be an ideal guest pupil if I can persuade her

proud mother to permit her to come to us." Then, for a moment, the principal sat gazing out of the window against which, in the light from the room, the beating snow could be seen.

"Virginia," she said at last, "you may be excused from your morning classes. I would like to have you accompany me to the old Burgess place. Then, while I am visiting with Eleanora, the mother, perhaps you can persuade the daughter that we would be glad indeed to have her with us as a guest pupil."

Mrs. Martin had risen and Virg did also. "Oh, how glad the girls will be," she said. "They have all promised to keep the identity of the guest pupil a secret. I am sure Eleanor will be very happy, if she will come." Then hesitatingly. "Mrs. Martin, do you think that my name should be taken from the Honor Roll because of——"

The principal interrupted her with an unexpected caress. "Dear girl," she said tenderly, "I wish I could put your name on twice." Then she was gone and there were tears in the eyes of the girl. Just such a caress would an own mother have given a daughter with whom she was pleased.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN EARLY MORNING VISIT.

THE other girls belonging to the Adventure Club were filled with envy, when, on the following morning, Virginia told them that she was not to attend the classes, but instead was to be driven in the teacher's sleigh (which was of Russian design with a fur robe hanging over the high-back seat) to the old house which they had visited on the day previous.

But they were agreed that their president was the most fitting member to accompany so important a personage as the principal of Vine Haven, and they all flocked into her room, to help her dress for the occasion. Sally, as a token of her undying devotion, brought in her beautiful white fur boa and muff and begged Virginia to wear them. "They'll keep you so warm and will remind you of me. Mrs. Martin won't mind your borrowing them, I am sure."

"Thank you, ever so much, dear. They are just lovely. I have never had furs. You see, we don't need them in Arizona, for, though it is very cold early in the morning and in the late afternoon, even

in February it is pleasant and warm during the middle of the day."

When at last Virg had been well bundled, with the aid of loving hands, she impulsively gave them all a French kiss, as Madame La Fleur had taught them to do, which was a mere touch of the lips on first one cheek and then on the other. At the door she turned to laughingly call. "One might think that I was starting for Arizona, instead of merely to the village of Vine Haven."

Then, when a chorus of merry good-byes had followed her as she tripped down the broad front stairs she found herself wondering if she wished she were starting for her beloved desert home. "Only four months more," she assured herself when she felt the clutch of homesickness that the merest thought of them all so far away, brought to her heart.

Micky was driving the white team, and Virginia noticed that at times he shivered. His overcoat, it was very evident, had been cut down from an old one of his father's and it was threadbare in places, while in others it was badly in need of repair. Almost unconsciously Virginia made a mental note of this.

Mrs. Martin, sitting by the side of the tall, bright-eyed maiden, smiled at her lovingly. "Virginia,"

she said, "I feel like a school girl playing truant, don't you?"

"I feel eager, as though something very interesting was about to happen." Then, with renewed interest, Virg continued: "Oh, Mrs. Martin, do tell me more about those unfortunate daughters of the eccentric old sea captain."

"You are right. They were, indeed, unfortunate. Eleanora's husband, whose name was Mr. Craven, I believe, disappeared a year after the birth of their child, and the disappointed young mother took back her father's name.

"Since then she has supported them both, doing settlement work in Boston.

"Dorinda was heard from until her son was eight. That was 10 years ago. After that the letters sent to her by Eleanora were returned, unopened, and on them was often written in a strange foreign hand, 'Address unknown.' "

"And so what became of the sister to whom she was so devoted and to that sister's son, the mother of your friend Eleanor never knew?"

When Micky turned in at the drive between the high hedge on the side farthest from town the door of the old house was thrown open and a truly beautiful young girl appeared. Although her skin was

olive in hue, a ruddy color glowed beneath it, and her eyes were a soft, dreamy brown, while long curls, held together at her neck with a bright-colored ribbon bow, hung to her waist.

Her expression brightened when she saw who their early morning visitors were and she darted within, probably to tell her mother who was arriving, but she was back in the open door by the time that Mrs. Martin and Virginia were ascending the well-shoveled front porch.

"And so you are my Eleanora's little daughter," the older woman said, graciously holding out her gloved hand to the girl. "I was sorry not to see you when you and your mother were here two summers ago. The last time I saw you, I think, was when you were seven."

"Oh, I just know that you are Mrs. Martin," the girl said eagerly, while Virginia hastened to apologize. "Pardon me for not having introduced you, Mrs. Martin. You did not tell me, that is, I really supposed that you were well acquainted."

The older woman smiled back at the tall girl who was following her. "I should be," she said. Then, hearing her name spoken, she hastened into the large, homey living-room, where the mother of Eleanor awaited them. "It was so good of you to come."

There were sudden tears in the eyes of the little woman, who was not yet strong. "It always makes me think of the old days, when I return here," Mrs. Burgess continued, when they were seated about the wide, cheerful hearth. "I've been wondering so much about Dorinda." Then, hopefully: "Mrs. Martin, you haven't heard, have you? I know how much Dorinda cared for you, and I thought perhaps—"

But the principal of Vine Haven was shaking her head. "No, Eleanora, I never heard. That is, not more recently than you have. My last letter was when the little boy was eight."

"They were on some island near Australia then," Mrs. Burgess said, "but though I have written to the American consul, I have never received information that would lead to a knowledge of Dorinda's whereabouts. I now believe that she is dead. I wish we might find her poor boy, if he is still living."

"Don't give up hope, Eleanora," Mrs. Martin said. "I feel sure that you will find him some day. Now, there is another matter of which I wish to speak."

Mrs. Burgess looked up with interest when the principal of Vine Haven said that she had made that early morning visit with some definite object in mind.

The older woman placed a hand, from which the

glove had been removed, upon the slim white one that was lying on the arm of her chair.

"Eleanora," Mrs. Martin's voice was tenderly sincere, "you have had a great deal of trouble and misfortune and I do wish you would permit me to help you."

According to a pre-arranged plan, Virginia had suggested that Eleanor show her about the old house, and so the two older women were alone.

"Help me?" Mrs. Burgess repeated. "Really, I don't need help, though I truly appreciate your thought of me."

It was very hard for Mrs. Martin to suggest that the proud younger woman accept what she believed would be charity. In fact, she just couldn't do it. Then an inspiration came to aid her. Only the day before the teacher of the very youngest girls had asked for a leave of absence for two months, as she was needed in her home near Boston. Not waiting to think out a plan, Mrs. Martin said hurriedly:

"Eleanora, I began in the wrong way. I meant, that I have a request to make which will greatly aid me, if you will grant it."

There was just a bit of a suspicious expression in the eyes that were lifted inquiringly.

"Why, Mrs. Martin, how could I aid you?" the younger woman asked.

"In this way." The principal's mind was now fully made up. "Miss Rose, my girl teacher, has asked for a leave of absence, and I would like your Eleanor to assist me in her place if you are willing."

Again there were tears in the listener's eyes and she held the hand of her long-ago teacher and friend in a closer clasp. "Mrs. Martin," she said, "I understand. You are offering my dear little girl an opportunity to receive an education where her mother spent many happy hours, and that free of tuition, but——"

"Don't say 'but' Eleanora. Don't you see that your daughter would be earning her tuition if she spent a few hours each day with the primary girls?"

The younger woman could not trust herself to speak, but her eyes were lifted gratefully. In her heart there was a sob. "Oh, how lonely she would be in Boston's tenement district without her girl's bright face awaiting her after each long hard day spent helping the miserable and the poor."

"But it's my Eleanor's chance," another thought reminded her. "I had mine, and I will not deprive her."

A tap upon the door interrupted. Then a merry voice called through a crack: "Have you two fin-

ished telling your secrets? The big house is so damp and cold, we're most frozen."

Mrs. Martin looked inquiringly at the younger woman, who had not voiced her decision. "Yes, come in, darling, and get warm by the fire. I have some wonderful news for you."

"Mother-mine, what?" The girl's face was radiant. "Granddad's hidden fortune hasn't been found, has it?"

Mrs. Burgess shook her head. "And never will be," was her response. "This is something real. Mrs. Martin is offering you a term's tuition at the Vine Haven Boarding School in exchange for a few hours a day of your time to be spent teaching the very little girls in the primary class."

Mrs. Martin noted Virginia's quick glance of surprise, but the others did not. Then the girl from the West correctly figured out just what had happened, and turned to see how Eleanor would receive the news. Not as she had expected, for, dropping on the stool at her mother's feet, she clasped her hand, as she said, "Though in one way I'd like to go to Vine Haven better than anything I could do. I just couldn't leave you. Why, Mother-Mine, who would live with you in our tiny apartment? Who would have ready for you the things you ought to eat when

you come home each night so tired after helping poor women who do not know how to help themselves and their babies. I just couldn't do it, Mother-Mine. I couldn't be happy knowing that you needed me." Then rising, the girl impulsively held out both hands to Mrs. Martin. "Thank you though. Thank you more than words can tell. I've just longed to go to Vine Haven Seminary and, perhaps, some time I may be able to, but I can't leave mother now, for, you see, she isn't well, and I want her to need me."

They had all risen and the visitors were about to leave, when sleighbells were heard, and Eleanor skipped once more to the front door to see who the new arrival might be.

"Why, it's Doctor Warren! Has he come for us so soon, Mother, do you suppose? We weren't expecting to return for another fortnight, were we?" Before Mrs. Burgess could reply, the good man bustled in. "Well, well," he said when he saw visitors, "I'm glad to find that you are not lonely. Don't hurry away," he held out a detaining hand when introductions had been made, "Mrs. Martin, since you are so old a friend of my patient, I may need your aid in persuading her to do something upon which my heart is set. She's stubborn, Mrs. Burgess is, as perhaps you know, but she has always said that

if the time ever came when she could help my wife, she'd be glad to do it."

Here Mrs. Burgess interrupted. "Of course I shall keep that promise. What do you want me to do?"

The good man fairly beamed. "That wife of mine wishes to spend a few months abroad, Italy and the like, and she insists that you are the companion she wants with her, and she simply won't take no for an answer. It will do more to restore your health than anything else can and now all that remains is to decide what our little Eleanor is to do in the meantime. I have thought—"

"Oh, Doctor Warren," the girl leaped forward and caught the hands of their old friend. "I'm disposed of for I am to be a sort of a teaching pupil for the rest of the term at the Vine Haven Seminary."

"Fine! In the words of Billy Shakespeare, 'All's well that ends well.'"

And so the matter was evidently decided although Mrs. Burgess has said not one word.

CHAPTER IX.

WINONA'S DECISION.

When Virginia returned to Vine Haven, she found the girls in the library for the mid-morning free half hour. As soon as Mrs. Martin had closed the door of her study, they flocked about their favorite begging her to tell them just what happened. Betsy taking their president by the arm led her into the long attractive room where the walls were lined with books, pictures and small statues.

"We were sure you'd be coming back about now," Sally said as she skipped along by the side of her beloved one, "and so we have been poking the fire to keep it bright."

Betsy teased. "Sally hasn't much faith in those furs that she loaned you. She has been so afraid that you would come home frozen, it being so cold today."

"I wasn't cold," Virg turned a grateful glance at the doll-like girl who was always hovering near her, "but I know someone who was."

"My goodness me, it couldn't have been Mrs. Martin," Betsy declared. "She was almost hidden in that

adorable long fur coat of hers. It must have cost a million dollars, unless her grandfather was a seal diver."

"They don't dive to catch seals," Megsy said, correctingly, "You're thinking of pearls."

Sally giggled. "I'd hate to wear a string of pearls instead of a fur boa on a day like this."

"But enlighten us; who was cold in your party?" Barbara brought the subject back to its point of digression.

"Micky was, and that set me to thinking of our plan. You know we said, since we are so grateful to him for having come out in that bitterly cold storm the other night to rescue us, that we would chip together and buy him something. Well, I believe the thing he needs most is a warm winter overcoat."

"Hurray for you, Virg! That's a spiffy idea! I'm for it! Lessee! I have at least fifty cents left after buying chocolate-chews and sweet pickles." This, of course, from twinkling-eyed Betsy.

"I'm the moneyed person in this party," Babs said with pretended pride, "for dad sent me ten dollars extra on my month's allowance, and it just came today. That shall go toward the new coat."

"We'll all chip in, but do let's talk fast, for, in three minutes and two seconds our free period will

be over." Margaret indeed was talking so rapidly that her words sounded jumbled. "We're wild to know what happened over at the old Burgess place."

"But I couldn't possibly tell it all to you in three minutes, for the two seconds are already gone, but this much I can say. Eleanor Burgess is coming, not as a guest but as a teaching pupil, so there will not be anything to keep secret after all."

"Hurray! That's jolly fine! I hope there's a mystery about her that I can solve." These comments were laughingly called back over the shoulders of the three departing girls for right on time the gong had pealed in the main corridor bidding them to return to their classes.

Virginia walked slowly upstairs to the room which she shared with Winona. She was thinking of the Manuscript Magazine. Eleanor had told her that she would rather write than eat Charlotte Russe and that that was saying a good deal as she adored that particular kind of dessert, but had always been too poor to have it except on very rare occasions such as birthdays or Christmas. "I'm just sure we'll all love her, and how I do hope one of her stories will do for this month's magazine." Virginia opened the door to the corner room and then stopped and stared within.

What she saw aroused her curiosity.

"Winona, where are you going? Why are you packing? You haven't had bad news from home, have you?" This last because of an open letter on the table which lay as though it had been hastily dropped as soon as it had been read.

The tall, graceful Indian girl stood up and turned to smile with her usual calm expression undisturbed.

"It's strange, isn't it," she said, "how very much can happen in a very little time? Just after you left this morning a telegram came from my brother, Strong Heart, which had been sent from Red Riverton. In it he told me that there was an epidemic in our village and that he was in town trying to find a physician who would be willing to go so far out on the desert and remain until all danger was over. 'Do not come yet. Night letter will follow,' that telegram stated. Of course I began at once to pack, believing that I might want to start West at any moment, but when the night letter came, my sister, Glad Song wrote that help had been obtained and that I need not come. I will read what she has written: 'Winona, several of our little ones passed from our village before we could obtain help. We no longer believe in our old medicine man and there is no one in our midst who knows about first aid meas-

ures. I have been wishing that you might learn something of these things before you return to us.' "

The Indian girl looked up, her dark eyes glowing with a new resolve. "You remember White Lily, that day just after the Christmas holidays when I told you that I felt that there must be some real mission in life for each of us?"

Virginia nodded. "Yes, I remember."

"And you agreed. I recall that you said if we each held the finding of that mission as a definite goal, we would be led to it, and now," the dark face was radiant, "this is what I may do for my father's people. I shall go away to another school, White Lily, where I can learn the ways of preventing epidemics."

How tall and straight, like an arrow, the Indian girl stood, and, in her eyes there was that far-away expression as though she were seeing a vision. Virginia thought of Joan d'Arc. That same expression was often pictured in the eyes of young women who were inspired with a high purpose and in whose hearts there was a noble resolve.

"Where shall you go, Winona?" This was no time for sentimental regrets that the friends were to be parted, their plans changed.

"I do not know. I shall speak with Mrs. Martin.

She will know best how to advise me. I will go to her now."

When Winona was gone, Virginia removed her wraps and sat before the fireplace, thinking. It was but a half hour before lunch and there was not time to attend any of the morning classes.

"Dear, wonderful Winona," the girl from the West was thinking, "she has found her life work and she will accomplish it, whatever the obstacles may be that will arise in her path." Then with a little sigh, Virginia thought of her own future. What did it hold for her? What worth-while thing was she to do? Of course she would return to her beloved desert, but who was there that she could really benefit with what she had learned, as Winona would benefit her father's remnant of a tribe? In a flash there came to the girl a picture in the fire. For three long years the little school house near the sand hills, which she and Winona had attended when they were younger, had been deserted. The storms had blown the sand high over the door-sill and the drifts, on the side toward which the wind most frequently blew were even up to the windows. Such a sad, forlorn little place it was!

And it could not be reopened. A teacher could not be hired by the State because there were only

six pupils to attend it. The three little Mahoys and another three little scraggly unkempt children belonging to a dry rancher over in Wild Hog Canon. Six children who were to grow up without the rudiments of knowledge because the Board of Education would not hire a teacher for that little desert school unless there were eight pupils.

Though she did not know it, the same light was burning deep in the eyes of Virginia that she had noted a few moments before in the dark orbs of her friend. "I, even I, am responsible for those six forlorn little babies," she was thinking. "They are my mission. Surely the State will permit a self-appointed teacher, whom they will not have to pay, to at least use the little school-house that is nearly hidden in sand drifts.

"Brother Peyton, Uncle Tex, Rusty Pete and the rest will gladly have a shoveling roundup and clear away the sand from the windows and doors. It will be a cheerful little room, flooded with sunlight and filled with color and hope and happiness."

Virginia's thoughts were interrupted by the return of Winona. "Strange things are happening," was her immediate remark. "Mrs. Martin had a folder this morning from a hospital training school, and in it Mrs. Martin is asked to send the name of any girl

who might wish to take the three months practical nursing course.

"I said that I would gladly take it, and, that there might be no delay, Mrs. Martin called up the hospital on long distance and she was asked to send me at once as one applicant for the term just beginning had been unable to take the work at present."

Virginia gladly assisted her friend to pack and that very afternoon the Indian girl left the school before the other pupils even knew what was happening.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW GOAL.

VIRGINIA was alone in her room. It looked barren on the side which had been occupied by Winona's bright blankets and reed baskets of quaint design. The Indian maiden had begged Virginia to permit her to leave her side of the room untouched, knowing how much the girl from the West enjoyed having about her the things that suggested the desert, but Virg had insisted that Winona would much more need them in the plain white-walled room in the hospital school.

As Virginia glanced around she was conscious of being more homesick than ever. "But four months isn't an eternity, and I do love it here," she had just concluded when there came a tapping on her door.

Betsy Clossen's merry face peeped in through the crack which she had opened. "Are visitors wanted or diswanted?" she inquired.

"We're improvising words tonight," Megsy, who closely followed, informed the lonely occupant.

"Yes, indeed, you're all wanted. Do come right in. I don't have to study just this minute, and it isn't well for me to be alone, for if I am long I'm liable to do what my roommate did."

"What, Virg! You wouldn't pack up and go to a hospital, would you?" Margaret looked alarmed.

"No, but I might pack up and go to the desert. Not to stay, but just to peep in and see what brother and Uncle Tex are doing. They're sitting in front of the fireplace now, I suppose, and Rusty Pete, perhaps, is there talking over the work for tomorrow."

"And my brother, Peyton, may have ridden over to V. M. to spend the night," Babs said. "He wrote me that he often does that, when he has business to attend to in Douglas. It would be too far to make the round trip in one day, and so he stops with Malcolm."

While the girls were talking there came a timid knock.

"Come in," was Virginia's hospitable invitation. The door opened and Dicky Taylor stood on the threshold.

"Hello there, Dicky bird. What's the big idea? Why not walk in?" This from Betsy.

"I wasn't sure you wanted me." The girl entered and closed the door. "You see, I don't belong to your little club-group, and I don't want to intrude, but ever since I went over to the Burgess place with Micky I've had such an interest in that nice girl and I hoped you would tell me what happened next."

There was a little wistful expression in the eyes of the pretty young girl and Virginia hastened to say: "We haven't a club, really, Dicky. I mean not one that shuts anyone out who wants to come in. I'm not at all sure but that we might have asked you to meet with us Saturday evenings for our lesson reviews, that being our main object, only we thought that you belonged to the Cora-Dora Troupe and that its activities and your lemonade teas took all of your free time."

"It's a curious thing." Dicky had seated herself at Virg's invitation, and she spoke with unwonted seriousness. "I can't understand it myself. Last

year I was perfectly contented with the nonsense and pranks that the twins are always thinking up, but this year I feel—well, I don't know as I can express it. I'll say sort of dissatisfied, as though I were mentally hungry. Oh, I don't know exactly what I do mean, but I feel it. A restlessness that the Cora-Dora Troupe and the teas do not seem to satisfy. And it just came to me recently that the something I want, you girls have. Even Babs is lots different this year. She seems to have a definite aim."

Virginia looked up brightly. "That's it, dear! That is the whole secret of content, I do believe. Having a definite aim and every day making some progress, however little, toward it." Then with a glance about at all of them: "You want to know just what happened to change Winona's plans, so I will tell you."

When the little tale had been told, Virginia said with a queer little smile: "Shall I tell you my new goal? Or rather the only one which I have definitely formed?"

"Oh, yes, please do!" It was little Sally who spoke. She had never even thought that a goal in life was necessary. She nestled a bit nearer to the speaker and listened with her baby blue eyes intently watching.

Then Virginia told of the little deserted schoolhouse, "It must be very lonely, for it's many a year since its door was closed and locked for the last time. I suppose it has stood there through the long sunny days and the long windy or rainy days, wondering why the eight laughing, happy little children never came again, and the rickety shed back of it wonders perhaps why eight little burros are no longer tied in its shelter."

"I remember that little drifted-in schoolhouse, Virg," Margaret said softly. "I rode by there alone one day, and I dimly recall having thought that it must be lonesome, though I haven't the imagination that you have, and oh! I do think it is just wonderful of you to want to give some of your free time to teaching those babies. Maybe I will be able to help. That is, if I am there."

"If you are there?" Virginia's tone held a surprised query. "Dear, adopted sister of mine, where else would you be but with us on V. M.? Don't you know that my brother Malcolm is your guardian and that our home is always to be your home, that is, if you want to go back with me? Of course, you will soon be free to choose your own way of living. Perhaps you'd rather stay in the East?"

"Oh, no, indeed. I want more than words can

tell to go back home with you and to live forever with my sister Virginia and my brother Malcolm—if they want me." Then with a little laugh she turned eyes in which there were tears to look at the listening group. "Girls, forgive me, please! I know I'm depressing everybody. I was just feeling so sort of useless and all alone."

"Oh, you're useful enough, Megsy. Cut out worrying about that," Barbara retorted gayly. "Didn't you sew seven buttons on undergarments for me just in time to save me from being pounced on by Miss Snoopins? And didn't she happen around five minutes after you had put up your needle to examine my work basket? 'Mees Barbara,' she remarked, and her voice was almost human, 'this is the first time I have ever found your undergarments neatly mended.' Honestly, I thought by her manner that she was disappointed. So don't ever say you aren't useful, Margaret Selover."

"What I want to know," Betsy put in irrelevantly "is, when Eleanor Burgess is going to honor this seminary with her presence and with whom she is going to room."

CHAPTER XI.

A NEW PUPIL ARRIVES.

But after all there was no mystery concerning the time when Eleanor Burgess was to arrive at the seminary, for she appeared, bag and baggage, on the second day after the visit which Mrs. Martin and Virginia had made to the supposedly deserted house.

The physician's wife was eager to get away from the wet, cold, Boston winter and into the golden, warm climate of southern Italy, and as she had no friend whose companionship she more enjoyed than that of the overweary mother of Eleanor Burgess, she was happy indeed when she heard that her dream-plan was to become a realization and that, within a fortnight.

Mrs. Warren accompanied her husband from Boston on his return trip, two days later, and after having taken Eleanor to the seminary, the luxurious automobile, with its non-skid tires that defied snow-banks, bore the three older people away to the city and left a girl whose heart was filled with mingled sentiments of gladness and sorrow.

It would be a long, long while, she knew, before the mother, who was dearest in all the world to her, would return. But she was more content as she pictured what that mother would look like after three months of carefree existence, just resting and basking under sunny Italian skies.

"What wonderful friends the Warrens are to us," the girl thought as she lifted the knocker of quaint design. The door was opened by the pleasant-faced Delia, and Mrs. Martin, chancing to leave her office at that moment, held out both hands to the newcomer.

"Dear Eleanor," she said, "how glad I am that you came today. Little Miss Rose is impatient to be away, but she wanted to remain until she could explain to you about her babies, all of whom she loves, as she is sure that you will, also. But first you must go to your room."

The principal noted an eager brightening of the girl's face as she looked up inquiringly. "Are you wondering with whom you are to room?" Mrs. Martin asked.

"I was hoping that it might be with Virginia Davis, but I suppose that someone else is with her."

Mrs. Martin had planned giving Eleanor the Tower Room, which was still unoccupied, but she recalled its remoteness, and fearing that Eleanor might be

lonely there, she at once decided to go to Virginia and ask if she would like the new pupil to take Winona's place until that maiden might return, if, indeed, she came back at all.

Excusing herself, Mrs. Martin went to one of the classrooms and stepped within. After consulting a moment with Virginia, she returned, saying with her kindly smile, "Your wish is to be granted." Then to Delia, "Will you go with Miss Burgess to the southeast corner room?"

Virginia could hardly wait until the class was dismissed to hasten upstairs and greet her new room-mate. Eleanor was standing at the window which overlooked the sea when she heard the door open. She turned quickly and walked toward the girl who had entered, hands outstretched. "Isn't it all wonderful," she exclaimed, "and just like a story in a book? Mother is to have the rest and change that she needs, and I am to have my opportunity to learn to write and draw, and be independent at the same time." Then leaning over impulsively she kissed Virg as she said sincerely. "It was mighty nice of you to let me be your room-mate."

"Eleanor," Virginia said, "I'm just looking forward to our free evenings. We both like the same

things and that, I am sure, is the secret of true comradeship."

That afternoon the new teacher of the primary pupils began her duties, and she reported, when she returned to Apple Blossom lane, that she just adored the babies (there were five of them, and the oldest was seven, while the youngest was but four and a half), and if only she could have a letter from her mother every other day, at least, she was sure that she would be the happiest girl in all the school.

At the afternoon free period Virginia threw Winona's warm-colored blanket over her head, for it had been a parting gift from the Indian maid to her schoolmate of many years, and, with a bundle of papers under her arm, she followed the path that was shoveled deep between snow banks, until it reached the shelter of the grove, and there, in many places, were pine needles on the ground that was but slightly covered with snow.

Miss Torrence was eagerly awaiting the editress of The Manuscript Magazine. "Herein lies our only hope," Virginia said when her English teacher had led her in to the sunny little den where she spent many hours planning lessons for the girls, reading or writing. Now and then a poem by Miss Torrence

appeared in a current magazine, to the delight of her girls.

The teacher smiled as she took the bundle of papers.

"Three stories and two poems, you say; and from them we may choose material for our first Manuscript Magazine? Thank you for bringing them. I will let you know tomorrow, Virginia, what I think of them."

The girl, as was her wont, stopped a moment in the sunny living-room to chat with the dear little old lady who liked nothing better than to have one of the pupils from the seminary tell her of their merry or busy life. "It gives me something pleasant to think over for quite a time," she often said. But best of all, she liked to have Virginia visit with her, and then their talk was not of the school, but of the desert, and the little old lady's eyes would glow as she would retell, time and again, the story of her journey across the plains with her father and mother in a prairie schooner. And Virginia would listen, at each telling, as though it were the first time she had heard it.

"She is such a nice girl," the old lady would invariably tell her daughter, when Virg was gone. "I like the others, but some way I like her best."

"Virginia is unselfish. She is sincerely interested in whatever interests others, and few girls are that," Miss Torrence would reply.

At that same time Kathryn Von Wellering had called a meeting of her "Exclusive Three."

CHAPTER XII.

THE EXCLUSIVE THREE.

KATHRYN VON WELLERING was lying back in her luxuriously upholstered reclining chair reading a novel with a title, which would have won the disapproval of Miss Snoopins if she had been able to find its hiding place, which, as yet, she had not.

The tall, dark girl, whose truly beautiful face was marred by a hard, selfish expression, unusual in one so young (for Kathryn was but sixteen), sat up when there came a light tap on her door.

"Come in," she called languidly as she reached toward a small table nearby and took a chocolate from an elaborately beribboned box. "You're five minutes late," she addressed the two girls who had entered in a petulant manner.

Belle Wiley, plump, pretty, with wavy light hair,

and clear hazel eyes, was followed by Anne Peterson who was tall and willowy, but whose yellowish eyes held an expression which suggested that she was not sincere. These girls were fifteen years of age, and, though their fathers were not as wealthy as Kathryn's, she had chosen them to take the places of the two former members of "The Exclusive Three." It was hard to understand why the pleasant-faced Belle Wiley was an admirer of Kathryn's, but Anne Petersen was undeniably a girl whom their leader would choose as a comrade.

"Why did you call a meeting today, Kathryn?" Belle inquired. She remained standing, although Anne had at once seated herself among the soft pillows on a deep comfortable chair, and had helped herself to candy, not waiting to be asked.

Kathryn Von Wellering lifted her dark eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders. "Should the dictates of a leader be questioned?" she inquired.

She turned toward the girl who was seated, and Anne at once replied. "I'll say not. You may send for me at any old time. Whatever you're scheming, you may count on me, old dear, I'm game."

"That's what I call loyalty." Kathryn smiled, though she ended it with an almost cynical lifting of one eyebrow. Then to Belle, who was still lingering

near the door, she said impatiently. "For goodness sakes, sit down! What's the big idea anyway, of seeming to be in such a rush? You haven't a pressing engagement in some other part of the school, have you?"

"Probably she's going to squeal your whole plan to that teacher's darling, Virginia Davis." This rather sarcastically, while the speaker helped herself to another candy.

Kathryn's expression was not a pleasant one. "Belle Wiley," she said, threateningly, "if you tell, I'll——well, be warned in time. Now sit down and behave! Have a chocolate. You certainly need sweetening!"

The girl addressed, reluctantly seated herself and their leader leaned forward to say with an intensity which she seldom gave to anything. "I hate her! I simply hate that upstart from the desert. And what's more, I hate all of her friends."

Belle interrupted. She was seeing the girl whom she had idealized as she truly was, for the first time, although she had had disconcerting glimpses since Kathryn began trying to win the editorship.

She now said, "I can't understand why you hate Virginia Davis. I was talking with Dicky Taylor today. We stood next each other in gym, and she

told me that Virginia doesn't want to be editor and would be pleased if someone else had it, but Miss Torrence insists that she keep it."

"Well, when Miss Torrence finds that the first copy of the magazine is a failure, perhaps she will be glad to let me have the place. She said, herself, that my story was one of the very best submitted."

Anne Petersen laughed as though at a joke that amused her, but Belle sitting on the very edge of her chair, blurted out with, "Yes, but you know as well as we do, that the story you submitted was not original."

Kathryn's eyes flashed dangerously, then she nearly closed them and regarded the rebellious member narrowly. "You are mistaken, Miss Wiley. My contribution was original, as all of my compositions have been since I entered this school."

"Yes, original, I'll agree," Belle hurried on fearlessly, "but not original by you."

"Oh, I say, cut out the wrangle. What's the big idea, Belle? Where did you unearth a conscience?" This from Anne, who had put her prettily slippered feet on a stool and was looking at them admiringly. "Say, Kathryn, old dear, those were spiffy silk hose that you gave me. I wish my padre had money

enough to buy silk things for me, but he thinks paying my tuition is all that is necessary."

Then with a questioning glance at Belle. "Where are the silk stockings Kathryn gave you? I thought you were mighty pleased yesterday when you received them."

Belle flushed and put her hand in the deep pocket of her dark blue school dress. She drew out a small, neatly wrapped bundle. This she placed on the table. "I can't accept them," she declared. "I thought at first that they were meant merely as a gift of friendship, but, when I got to thinking it over, I knew they were meant to pay me for having been untrue to myself."

"Hi-ho! Hear the young preacher! Any wings started?" Anne's taunt was interrupted by a now thoroughly angry Kathryn. "Belle Wiley," she said, "for the past month you've been hanging around my room, morning, noon and night, telling me how much you admired me and hoping that some day there'd be something you could do to show me how much you liked me, and now, the very first thing I ask you to do, you act up in this way."

"But it wasn't right. It wasn't honest; the thing you asked me to do."

"Indeed? I merely asked you to write so poor a

story that Miss Torrence would find it unfit to use in the first copy of The Manuscript Magazine. You did it. Nobody could have written a poorer one."

Anne stopped munching chocolates. Leaning forward, she said: "And, of course, since we had done that simple little thing for Kathy, she wanted to show her appreciation in some nice way and she gave us each a pair of silk stockings. I call that a mighty fine friend to have, myself."

Belle rose as though she were about to go. "I'm sorry, Kathryn," and there was a little break in her voice. "I hate to be a piker and I know you both believe that I am, but until today, I didn't see things in the right light. I did love you, Kathryn, and when you care for anybody, don't you understand, it's awfully hard for you to believe that——," she hesitated miserably, but bravely kept on, "that your ideal is not on the square. When I came in here and found you copying the story you submitted for the contest, I just couldn't believe my eyes. You said at first it was a story you had written long ago, but afterwards you confided to us that you were on easy street, for a cousin of yours in Boston who was a crack at composition, sent one every week for you to read and—"

Kathryn pretended to yawn. "Please bring the

sermon to an end. I'm glad to have found out in time just how unworthy a friend you are, Belle. Goodness, it scares me, when I realize how near I came to letting you in on the reason for which I called this meeting. Please close the door after you as you leave." The words were calm, but there was a glint in the dark, half-closed eyes that was threatening. Belle knew that she had been dismissed. At the door she turned to repeat, "I'm sorry, Kathryn, but I can't——"

"Just be careful what you say and do," was the warning that followed the retreating girl. She heard the key turn in the lock, then she went to her room to sob out her disappointment in her friend.

"Well, this is what comes of taking one of the common people into your confidence." Kathryn walked to the window when she had locked the door and looked out at a snow-covered campus. "I knew, of course, that Belle's father was a tradesman, and, out of this seminary, I most certainly would not have associated with her." Anne winced. Her own father's profession was not one followed by aristocrats. He conducted a pool room in the Middle West. How she hoped Kathryn knew nothing of this.

"What is your father's—er—occupation?" Anne feared business would sound too crude.

Kathryn replied without turning around. "He is a Wall Street financier." High sounding surely, but meaning nothing to the listener.

"Oh, don't mind, Belle." Anne was searching through the box to find a candy of the kind she liked best. "There's one thing about her, and that is, you can count on her not to squeal. She's dropped out of this thing because—well, because, you know, it isn't honest. Some girls are queer that way, they'd rather be honest than wear silk stockings." Anne was again admiring her silk-covered ankles.

She did not see the scornful turn to Kathryn's thin lips. "I did not consider myself dishonest, Miss Petersen," she said coldly.

Anne laughed. "Gracious guns, Kathy! Don't put on any high and mighty airs with me. I don't care how many compositions of your cousins you copy, but I repeat, Belle is right, it *isn't* considered honest."

"I didn't say that story was original by me," Kathryn retorted. "I wrote in the upper left hand corner, as Miss Torrence has requested. 'This is an original story written by Kathryn Von Wellering. This story was original by my cousin and the handwriting was mine.'"

Anne sat up and opened her yellowish eyes wide, as though in surprise.

"Say, Kathryn, are you trying to convince yourself, or me, that black is white? 'Tisn't necessary at all, as I stated before. It is black, clear through, you and I know it, just as well as Belle knew it, only we aren't worrying about it. For Pat's sake forget it, and proceed with the meeting. I came here (though I'm supposed to be practicing), because I understood that you had something important to say. If you have, spiel along, for I've got to be down in the music room in five minutes. That's when Miss King looks in to see if I'm on duty. Luckily for me Esther Dorset wanted to practice half an hour longer, but the time's most up."

Kathryn regarded the speaker through half closed eyes as was her custom. "I suppose you call that honest."

"Me? Not at all! I knew if that piano was silent, Miss King would be down there in two minutes to see why I wasn't practicing, but with Esther running scales as she is, I'll get the credit, don't you see, old dear? Hurry on now, what is it you wanted to say?"

Kathryn had seated herself but instead of speaking she looked into the fire. At length she said, "When people aren't honest, you can't be sure that you can trust them." Then with a sudden quick

glance, "You and I aren't sure we can trust each other, are we?"

"Not at all!" agreed Anne. "But I'd trust Belle with anything. She's a mighty fine little girl, Belle is." Then rising and stretching languidly—"Well, so long, guess you've changed your mind about coming out with your plan."

Kathryn made an impatient gesture. "Sit down. Since you've been so frank with me, telling me just what I am, at least I'll ask your advice."

Anne dropped into her chair again as she said, "You flatter me, old dear, but make it snappy. I do want to get in half an hour at the piano."

Kathryn was still looking in the fire. "I thought," she began, "that when you two girls handed in such poor compositions it would be too late to get others for this month's Manuscript Magazine, but today I hear that a new pupil has arrived who has submitted three stories and two poems and that Miss Torrence is delighted with them."

"Well, what next? You didn't call a meeting merely to tell us that." Anne glanced at her wrist watch.

"No, of course not." Kathryn's dark eyes searched her friend's face.

"This is the night the teachers assemble in Mrs. Martin's office for their Faculty Meetings."

"Yes, so it is. But I'm still in the dark." Anne looked somewhat interested, and even more curious.

"Dark? That's what it will be, for there isn't a moon, and, what's more, the clouds are so heavy, it will probably snow."

"Which means?" Anne couldn't imagine what Kathryn was planning. "Which means that you and I could slip over to Pine Cabin while Miss Torrence is here and—well—it wouldn't be hard to get in her study window. I heard her say last week that the lock is broken but that she wasn't afraid."

Anne looked more puzzled than shocked. "What would we do in her study? She hasn't anything I want."

"Stupid! She has all of the contributions for the magazine in her desk. I saw them there today when I went to return a book."

"Oh-h! Light is dawning. You want to get them?"

"Yes, and burn them. Then where will their Manuscript Magazine be for this month?" Anne had risen. She hesitated before replying. Kathryn saw this. Going to her dresser, she picked up a bracelet set with blue stones. "Here, you may have it." Anne's expression was hard for the watcher to interpret. The

yellowish eyes were admiring the sparkle deep in the stones. Kathryn breathed a sigh of relief when Anne slipped on the bracelet. "Thanks, old dear," she said. "I'll drop in about eight."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HEART OF ANNE.

KATHRYN VON WELLERING had been right in her prophecy. It was indeed a dark night. The clouds had gathered in denseness through the late hours of the afternoon and a chilling wet wind swept from the sea.

Miss Torrence hesitated about going to the faculty meeting. Her mother was not well. She had not been strong enough to get about since the winter set in, and of late she seemed weaker than usual.

"I wouldn't leave you tonight, little mother," the young teacher said, "if it were not that a very important matter is to be discussed. I'll leave a low light burning in my study; one nearer than that might keep you awake, and I do want you to sleep and then you will not miss me."

"It's all right, daughter. Don't mind me. I'll just

lie here and remember pleasant things that happened in the long ago. I'm not afraid."

Miss Torrence leaned over the bed and kissed the sweet face of the little old lady that looked up at her wistfully from under a beribboned night cap. "Be sure to take your umbrella and wear your rubbers."

The young teacher smiled as she went out. Ever since she was a small girl starting to kindergarten, this thoughtful mother had asked, "Are you sure you have a clean handkerchief, daughter?"

The wind caught at the umbrella the moment it was raised, just beyond the shelter of the grove, and it had to be closed again, but, although there was a fine mist-like snow in the air, it was not wet enough to drench her. Gathering the flying folds of her cloak closely about her, Miss Torrence hastened to the basement entrance of the school, and soon appeared in the upper corridor and went at once toward the door of the principal's office. Two girls stood in front of the blackboard on which was written in big white letters, "Honor Roll."

"Good evening, Miss Torrence." One of them spoke in an unusually friendly manner.

"Good evening, Kathryn," was the kindly given reply. "Are you and Anne searching for your names? She who will, can be on the Honor Roll, you know."

"Oh, no indeed! We weren't expecting to be on it. We were rather surprised, though, to find that Barbara Wente's name is here."

"It was put up today. I am so glad." The young teacher smiled again and entered the office from which, when the door was momentarily open, the girls could hear the hum of voices.

"It's going to be a long session, I'm thinking," Kathryn said in a low voice. "Now that we are sure that Miss Torrence is here, let's go at once to Pine Cabin."

Anne Petersen hesitated. She lifted her hand at that moment to adjust her hair and the glint of the blue stones caught her eyes.

"Very well, lead the way," was what she said.

Kathryn went upstairs to her room and Anne accompanied her. Earlier in the evening she had left there her warm cloak and tam. "Wait until we are sure the games are started in the gym," Kathryn warned, "then, with the teachers all occupied, we can slip out of the side door without attracting attention."

This was indeed easily accomplished, and they were soon breasting the wet cold wind that swept in from the sea.

As they neared the Pine Cabin Kathryn whispered: "There's a low light burning in the study. That's

good for us. We can see at once where the papers are and we won't stumble over things."

"I hope the old lady is asleep," said Anne. "I heard Miss Torrence say only last week that her mother is so frail now that she has to carry her from the chair she sits in all day to bed at night."

"What do I care about her? Be quiet, will you? I'll lift the window and we will have no trouble stepping in from this porch ledge."

Kathryn was right. The lock to the window had been broken and as Miss Torrence had no fear of thieves, she had not called the gardener to repair it. The window creaked slightly as it was lifted, and the girls waited, listening breathlessly, before they stepped inside.

They were not the only ones who heard it. The little old lady in the adjoining room had also heard.

"Daughter, is that you? Have you come back?" a tremulous voice called.

Anne darted a quick look at her companion, and motioned her to be absolutely quiet. The little old lady sank back on her pillow believing the sound to have been caused by the rising wind. When the voice was not heard again, Kathryn began to search through the desk. The bundle of manuscripts that

she had seen, when she had that afternoon returned a book to Miss Torrence, was not in evidence.

In her impatience she was not as quiet as she might have been. "You'll frighten the little old lady," Anne Petersen whispered.

"What do I care. She can't walk! She'll never be able to tell who was here," was Kathryn's cold reply.

Anne's glance at her friend was scornful. "Do you mean to tell me, Kathryn Von Wellering, that you don't care whether you frighten that little old lady to death or not? You'd sneak away, would you, and leave her all alone here unable to get up and terrorized for the long hour before her daughter gets back?"

Luckily the moaning of the wind made it impossible for the little old lady to hear this whispered conversation.

Kathryn's lips curled, but before she could reply, her searching eyes discovered the manuscripts tied in a neat bundle. They were ready to be given to Virginia on the morrow. Seizing them, the girl climbed through the window, upsetting, as she did so, a flower pot that was on the sill. It fell to the floor with a crash

At that moment they heard a pitiful, frightened

cry from the room occupied by the frail, elderly mother of Miss Torrence.

Anne Petersen turned, her eyes flashing. "Kathryn Von Wellering," she said, "I'm going back there and comfort that poor little old lady. I have a grandmother of my own at home and I wouldn't want her to be treated in this way. You are the most heartless girl I have ever known. Here, take your bracelet; take it or I'll throw it in the snow."

Kathryn caught the arm of the other and tried to drag her toward the school, but Anne shook herself free. "Coward," she said, "all you are afraid of is that I'll squeal on you. Don't you worry. I won't. And don't you ever speak to me again. I'm through."

Turning, she walked around to the front of the cabin and entered the door. She heard the pitiful sobbing of the little old lady.

"Mrs. Torrence," she called reassuringly, "don't be frightened. It's just one of the girls from the school. I—I had a sort of a headache, and I—I came out to let the cool night air—" For the first time in her fifteen years Anne felt a scorn for lying. She wished she could tell the truth, but she couldn't. She had promised Kathryn she wouldn't squeal.

"Who is it? Which one of the girls, and what was

it fell?" came the faint voice, but Anne noted with relief that the fear was gone.

She walked to the door of the bedroom and switched on the light. "I'm Anne Petersen," she said. "You haven't seen me before. I haven't been over to Pine Cabin, but I heard you call out and so I came in."

"Well, it was ever so nice of you, my dear. My daughter never will lock the doors. She says there is no one who wants to come in, for harm, and I suppose she is right. I thought I heard something fall in the house, but like as not it was something just outside that the wind blew down."

It was plain that the little old lady was trying to assure herself that all was well, but as Anne went nearer she could see that she was shivering. "You're cold, aren't you?" she asked kindly.

"Yes, I tried to get up but I couldn't."

"Well, I'll cover you more, then I'll make you a warm drink. I'm going to stay with you till Miss Torrence comes." The girl had made this sudden decision. She knew that, brave as the little old lady was trying to be, she had been greatly frightened.

A frail hand reached out and a grateful glance assured the girl that she was right.

"Oh, how kind you are! I'll tell my daughter.

She'll be so pleased. Somehow she didn't want to leave me alone tonight. The wind makes me lonesomelike, when she's gone."

"I know. It makes me lonesome sometimes, too, for my mother. She didn't live many years after I came. Grandmother brought me up and she tried to teach me to be good—but—I guess I've failed."

The frail hand patted the arm of the girl. "Dearie, how can you say that when you're being so kind to me? I wish all girls were as good and as thoughtful of old folks as you are."

Anne hurried to the kitchen. She could not understand why tears had come. She lighted the fire, and, finding there a pan of broth, she heated it. Then lifting the little old lady she gave it to her. A few moments later a clock in the study struck eight. "I think I'll go now," Anne said, rising. "Miss Torrence will be here directly."

"Of course, dear girl, go right along. That warm broth has made me so sleepy I'll be drowsing when daughter gets here. Promise you'll come and see me again. Next to Virginia Davis I like you best of any of the girls."

"I promise," Anne said as she kissed the little old lady, who was so like her own grandmother. Then she slipped away.

Miss Torrence had to bend her head to battle through the snow storm that was beating down upon the campus when she emerged from the basement door and so it was, when she entered the little grove, that she did not see a dark figure standing close to a tree trunk and almost hidden by low growth of pines.

Nor did she enter her mother's room, for the even, quiet breathing assured her that the little old lady was fast asleep.

Miss Torrence was unusually tired and so she turned out the low light in the den without glancing around. It was not until the next morning, while she and her mother were at breakfast, that she heard the story of a visitor.

I don't recollect what her name was, daughter, but she was the nicest, kindest girl. I'm sure she must be one of your favorites up at the school. Something had frightened me. I don't like to tell it, being as you say I fancy things, but I did think that I heard the window open in your study and then, by and by, something fell, crash, but pretty soon this nice girl came and told me the wind outside was blowing things around pretty much."

Miss Torrence looked both troubled and puzzled. She knew what her mother did not, that the pupils of Vine Haven Seminary were not permitted to leave

the school after dark, and surely no one would choose a wet, cold, blustery night to take a walk on the ocean cliff.

As soon as she had her mother settled in a comfortable chair in the bow window, where boxes of ferns and flowers were growing, and a canary in a cage sang cheerily, Miss Torrence went at once to her den. Her first glance revealed the fallen flower pot; her second the rummaged desk. At that moment there came a rapping on the front door and the young teacher hastened into the living room, troubled and perplexed, to answer the summons.

CHAPTER XIV.

FINDING THE CULPRIT.

When Miss Torrence opened the door, half expecting to see the mysterious visitor of the night before, she beheld instead the editor of the Manuscript Magazine.

"Oh, Virginia, I am so glad you came. Mother mine, if you will excuse us, I would like to take Virginia at once to my study, as it is nearly time for us to go up to the school, and I have much to discuss with her."

"Of course, daughter. Is it about the Manuscript Magazine? I'm sure it will be a nice one, with such a nice girl for an editor." Then when they had started away the little old lady recalled them to add: "Daughter, ask Virginia who she thinks it was came to visit me last night. She was such a dear girl, I want to see her again, and thank her for being so kind to me. She said I reminded her of her own grandmother, and when she kissed me good-by I know she was crying."

"Yes, mother, I will," the young teacher promised. Then, when they had entered the study, she carefully closed the door and turned a troubled face toward her companion.

"Virginia," she said in a voice very unlike her own, "some one of the girls climbed in this window last night and carried away the bundle of manuscripts that I had tied up to give to you this morning. In going out, she must have hastened, or perhaps she had not noticed the flower pot." Miss Torrence pointed at the floor where it lay, its pieces scattered and the small flowering plant withering.

"Who could it have been?" But even as she spoke, the girl knew that but one pupil in Vine Haven desired to prevent the appearance that week, of the Manuscript Magazine.

"I am almost convinced," Miss Torrence told her, "that the culprit is Kathryn Von Wellering. I am sure that you are also, but I hardly know how to proceed with an inquiry into the matter."

"There is nothing here that would identify her?" Virg glanced about the small den.

"No, I looked, but I haven't been outside yet. It wasn't snowing when I returned, and so perhaps their footprints may still be visible."

Together they slipped out a back door that they might not arouse the curiosity of the little old lady who, sitting in the living room, was partly dozing in the sun.

"It must have snowed in the night," Virginia, in the lead, called over her shoulder, "for there isn't a trace of a footprint beneath this window."

Miss Torrence sighed. "I especially regret this, for Eleanor Burgess told me that she had no other copy of her stories, and I assured her that need cause her no alarm, as nothing could happen to them while they were in either my possession or with you. I am sure that she treasured them, and now, without doubt, whoever stole them has destroyed them."

"Shall we take Eleanor into our confidence?" the girl asked. "Not quite yet. I shall go at once to Mrs. Martin and ask just what she would wish me

to do to start an investigation. I do not want to openly accuse one of her pupils, and perhaps have that girl leave the school. It is all very unfortunate."

They bade the little old lady good-by, and walked slowly through the grove and toward the seminary. It was a gloriously clear day. The freshly fallen snow on the pine branches sparkled and gleamed, while the blue-gray waves of the ocean danced and sang, it would seem, for very joy. It was the first time the sun had shone in weeks and nature was glad. But even the brightness about them could not lighten the load on the hearts of Miss Torrence and Virginia.

The girl went to her class, but Miss Torrence arranged with Miss King to relieve her for at least ten minutes.

Mrs. Martin looked up wonderingly when a tap sounded on her office door. It was 9, and teachers and pupils were usually in the classrooms; but then it might be the housekeeper or even Patrick needing advice.

When the door opened and the young teacher entered, Mrs. Martin exclaimed: "Something is wrong. I can tell by your expression. Be seated, Miss Torrence."

"I would rather stand. The telling will take but

a moment and Miss King, who is with my girls, is due in the music room."

In as few words as possible, the story was told.

"Why, this is unbelievable!" Mrs. Martin was shocked and amazed. "My natural conclusion is, as was yours, that Kathryn Von Wellering is the only girl who has a personal interest in the destruction of those manuscripts. You say that Anne Petersen was with her when you first arrived last evening?"

"Yes, they were standing in front of the Honor Roll, pretending to scan it, but I now believe that they were waiting to be sure that I was coming to the meeting, as they naturally would not wish to go to Pine Cabin if I were there."

"I have noted of late that Belle Wiley and Anne Petersen are often with Kathryn Von Wellering, and I have regretted it, especially in the case of Belle, who is a dear little girl, and I cannot but deplore the influence of Kathryn, whose mother thinks of nothing but society and whose father, I fear, enriches himself at the expense of the poor. I have been told that he is a conscienceless Wall Street broker. I regret that I accepted Kathryn as a pupil, and if it seems best, Miss Torrence, for the good of the other girls, I will write her mother asking her to send for her daughter."

Then rising, Mrs. Martin stood for a thoughtful moment gazing out at the snow-covered world. At last, turning toward the waiting teacher, she said: "Kathryn, Anne and Belle are all in your 9 o'clock class, are they not?"

"Yes, Mrs. Martin. That is, they should be. If they are not there this morning, shall I send Virginia in to tell you?"

"Yes, if you will," the principal replied. "If she does not come almost at once, I will know that those three girls are to be with you for one hour." Then she added: "Do not permit them to leave the class during that period, Miss Torrence. I shall send for Miss Buell, and ask her to thoroughly search the rooms occupied by those three pupils."

The young teacher took her departure and five moments later, as Virginia had not appeared, Mrs. Martin rang for the member of her faculty who had charge of the rooms and the corridors. Popularly she was known among the girls as "Miss Snoopins."

"Miss Buell," Mrs. Martin had drawn her within the office and closed the door, "I want you, with all speed, to search first Kathryn Von Wellering's room, then Anne Petersen's, and if you have not found a package of manuscripts in either, you may look in

Belle Wiley's room. I can trust you to be speedy and discreet."

Miss Buell sniffed. "Well, I certainly hope I'll find whatever evidence it is you want in that disagreeable Von Wellering girl's room. She treats folks as if they weren't human, but that little Belle Wiley, why, Mrs. Martin, she's a sweet, innocent little lamb. She never tries to hide things or play tricks on me the way the others do, or at least some of them."

Mrs. Martin, knowing that Miss Buell's weakness was loquacity, dismissed her, and then sat down at her desk, supposedly to attend to business matters, but she found her thoughts often wandering. She was indeed more troubled because of what had happened than either Miss Torrence or Miss Buell realized. "She who steals a composition will steal anything else she desires. It is the act, and not the article, which proclaims one a thief."

Not more than fifteen minutes had passed when the principal heard footsteps descending the stairs, and so rapidly, though quietly, did they approach her door, that she believed, and correctly that Miss Snoopins had been successful in her search.

Mrs. Martin had the door open before Miss Buell could rap. That thin angular woman entered, her

eyes fairly glittering with the joy of having accomplished her errand.

"I found 'em," she announced, "and what's curious, maybe, I found two of 'em."

"Why, how could you, Miss Buell, when only one package of manuscripts was missing." The principal was puzzled indeed, for at that moment from beneath her copious gingham apron, Miss Snoopins did produce two bundles of compositions. These she laid on the desk, saying, as she pointed at one accusingly. "That was in the bottom of Kathryn Von Wellering's trunk and it was plain she was trying to hide it, for she had a tray over it so at first glance it would look like that was the bottom and no use to look farther, but I was bent on finding evidence and——"

Mrs. Martin looked disappointed. "But these are old compositions, I judge, and not the ones for which we are searching. This other package is more like it. Where did you find that?"

"In Anne Petersen's room and the queer thing about it was that it wasn't hidden at all. It was lying right on the floor inside of her door. That one wasn't hard to find. It didn't——"

The principal interrupted. "Miss Buell," she said,

"will you kindly ask Miss King to again relieve Miss Torrence and you need not return."

Mrs. Martin pretended not to notice the disappointment plainly portrayed in the other woman's thin face. "Then that's all you want me to do?" she lingered in the open door.

"Yes, thank you, Miss Buell. You have helped us immeasurably."

Almost at once Miss Torrence entered the office and found Mrs. Martin examining the two packages which she had not untied.

"This is the one that I lost," she identified unhesitatingly. Then glancing up questionably. "You say that it was found lying on the floor just inside of Anne Petersen's room. That is curious! What do you make of it?"

"I haven't decided as yet. But this much I am sure. Belle is not involved. I am glad of that."

Then, as she noted that the young teacher seemed to be greatly interested in the manuscripts found in Kathryn's trunk, the principal inquired, "What are they, Miss Torrence?"

"Stories, poems and other compositions written by a cousin of Kathryn's, it would seem, who is attending a girls' school in Boston. They are the same in subject matter which Kathryn has been handing

in week after week, writing upon them, as is our custom, 'original stories written by Kathryn Von Wellering.' "

"That decides the matter, for, whether or not she or Anne Petersen entered your cabin last night, Kathryn can no longer remain as a pupil in this school. I shall write her mother today asking her to send for her daughter."

Miss Torrence looked thoughtful, then said, "The blame for the package stolen from my den has, of course, been placed upon Anne Petersen. Mother told me that the girl who visited the cabin was most tender to her, quieting her fear and heating broth to warm her when she was chilled from having attempted to arise. That never could have been Kathryn, nor, am I sure that it could have been Anne. Although I have sometimes thought that Anne assumed an indifference and heartlessness that might not be real. What shall we do?"

"If it were Anne who was so kind to your mother, then there is something in her nature that we can work upon. It might do more harm to her character to dismiss her, than to keep her for a time. I wish, Miss Torrence, that, at the close of your class, you would bring those two girls to my office."

The pupils of the 9-to-10 class of rhetoric had been

puzzled by the frequency with which Miss King had relieved their teacher during the one short hour. Only Kathryn and Anne were suspicious of the real nature of the interruptions. The former tried to leave at once, when the gong in the corridor announced a 15-minute free period, but Miss Torrence was watchful. "Kathryn Von Wellering and Anne Petersen will remain in their seats while the others pass out, if you please."

Kathryn was inclined to make a break and run for her room when Miss Torrence asked them to accompany her to the office of the principal.

The young teacher noticed the difference in the behavior of the two girls. Anne seemed composed and there was a new determination in her face.

Kathryn, with an attempt at bravado, was nevertheless the one whose manner betrayed guilt.

The girls were closely watched when the packages were pointed out to them, no explanation being given. It was plain that Anne was not in the least troubled until she was informed where the stolen manuscript had been found. "In my room?" she repeated with such genuine surprise and amazement that Mrs. Martin heard herself saying with conviction, "Yes, Anne; but they were thrown there just after you left, by

Kathryn, without doubt; as she wished to place the entire blame upon you."

Anne shrugged slightly, and seemed to be her old indifferent self. She had in that moment recalled her promise of the night before, when she had said: "Coward! All you are afraid of is that I will squeal. Well, I won't, but I don't want you ever again to speak to me. I'm through!"

"This other package of compositions, Kathryn, was found in your trunk and—"

The girl angrily interrupted the speaker. "Mrs. Martin, what right has anyone to look in my trunk and take out of it something belonging to me?"

Mrs. Martin found it hard to speak calmly. "We reserve the right to read all letters and search where we will. This is stated in the seminary folders and is read by the mothers of the pupils before they choose this school for their daughters to attend, and, as for stealing—what did you call it, Kathryn, when at night you entered Miss Torrence's home and took something which did not belong to you?"

"I didn't take it," the girl flared. "You just said that you found it in that—that tattling girl's room."

"Anne has not tattled." The principal's voice was hard now. "Kathryn, go to your room at once and

begin your packing. I shall wire your mother to meet the afternoon train, as you will be on it."

Anne Petersen expected to hear more of the incident, but it was evidently closed. Miss Torrence had taken an opportunity to thank the girl for her kindness to her mother, adding that she would make that frail invalid most happy if she could find time, now and then, to call upon her, and, to her own surprise, the girl soon found the moments that she spent in the bow window with the little old lady (who reminded her so much of her own grandmother) were among the happiest of her day.

There she often met Virginia Davis. Too, she promised to write the very best story that she could for the second edition of the Manuscript Magazine, and she said that she would ask Belle Wiley to do the same.

With the departure of Kathryn Von Wellering, the large front room was left vacant, and, as the two small rooms occupied by Anne and Belle were on the north side of the school, and cold in winter, Mrs. Martin asked them if they would like to be roommates and share the large, sunny room, formerly occupied by Kathryn.

Mrs. Martin and Miss Torrence had been right. Anne Petersen, who had scorned lying, even when

she had resorted to it, developed into one of the finest girls in the seminary; one whom every teacher could trust.

This was partly due to the something within herself, it is true, but also to the loving influence of the little old lady in Pine Cabin and to the room-mate who believed in her.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MANUSCRIPT MAGAZINE.

The Manuscript Magazine was a great success. All of the girls who stood E in penmanship (and that meant excellent) volunteered to assist in copying the stories that were to be bound together in magazine form.

When it was completed the new editor was invited to read it in assembly from the title page to the last period, and a most enthusiastic applause followed. Many a girl, listening, was inspired to do better work in English, that before the close of the school year she might have one of her stories in the Manuscript Magazine.

Virginia, flushed and happy, because of the success of her efforts, left the gym where the forty-five

pupils of the school had been assembled, and with her were her own particular friends, members of the Study Club.

They were all clattering at once. "I told you so," Babs was saying. "A thousand times you would have given up the editorship if we would have permitted you to do so."

"I think it was a jim-cracky fine get-up," Betsy declared, walking backwards in front of the group that was on its way to "The Sign of the Tea Kettle," where Dicky Taylor was to dispense a real treat—not the usual lemonade, she had whispered mysteriously, but something different, and extra, and with permission, so there would be no fear of a visitation from Miss Snoopins.

Dicky was hurried right up to her room after the reading of The Manuscript Magazine, so when the group had reached the upper corridor she threw the door open to greet them before Betsy had had time to tap.

"I am so glad that Dora and Cora have gone to the city with their father professor. I would hate to leave them out and hurt their feelings, but since you have invited me to become a member of your club I would rather just have our own group."

The guests flocked into the sun-flooded room,

which was filled with momentoes of many a merry occasion. There were paddles crossed upon the walls.

"Oh, girls, didn't I have the time of my young life when Tom and I spent a summer on Hide-Away Lake? We each had a canoe and I became as skillful as—as Minnehaha, if I do say so, as I shouldn't."

"You'll have to show me!" Betsy began to tease, when Dicky whirled around and pointed at the wall, where a long row of mounted kodak pictures reached almost to the floor from somewhere up near the ceiling. "A kodak can't lie!" she retorted. "Put on your specs, and behold." The girls crowded around the panel of pictures, and many an amusing remark was uttered. "Say! Dicky made a fine boy in those hiking trousers."

"Lookee, will you? Here she is having a canoe race with a good-looking boy."

"They're near enough alike to be twins."

While her guests were so intent upon the pictures the little hostess, in another part of the room, was busily occupied behind a screen. A moment later she removed this and rang a tiny silver bell. The girls whirled to behold a table on which were seven plates of ice cream and a big dish heaped with little cakes.

"I say, this is some class!"

"Spiffy! That's what I call it."

"Here you, Babs, stop edging around to where the biggest piece is. I had my eye on that one myself."

"Betsy, be quiet! What would Miss King think of our manners?"

"Oh, alas and alack! There are place cards, and so there's no picking a piece after all."

"The truth of the matter is, I cut the ice cream brick by rule, and each one of the pieces is two inches thick."

"It's delicious, Dicky," Virginia said, "and I especially appreciate it after having read aloud for so long."

Silence reigned for at least five minutes that the treat might be enjoyed to the full, then, when the dishes had been cleared away, Virg offered to stay and wash them, but Dicky shook her head.

"What?" she inquired in mock dismay. "Do you think that we would permit the president of our club to wash the dishes? No, indeed! I choose Betsy Clossen and Barbara Wente to assist me. Moreover, I heard you say you were due at Pine Cabin at 4.30, and it's five minutes of that time now."

Betsy moaned and groaned when she found that she had been elected to wash dishes, but Babs cheerfully accepted. The other girls went their various

ways, some to do reference in the library, Sally to take a lesson on a beautiful gilded harp which her mother had recently sent to the school, and which was the joy of all of the girls, though none but the professor who came from Boston once a week could play upon it.

"Little Sally, she do well," the long-haired foreigner had assured Mrs. Martin. "She has ze ear. More than some! Zat Betsy, she has no ear."

It chanced that Babs had been passing through the lower corridor at the time, and as she dried dishes she took the opportunity to tease Betsy about her missing member.

"You can't make me mad telling me that. I warned my dad that I never would make a musician, but he said that he wasn't going to leave a stone unturned to try to make me into something."

"Poor man! He's doomed to bitter disappointment," Babs began, then suddenly whirled and gave her friend a hug. "I love you!" she said. "I wouldn't have you different, not for anything, so now!"

"Say, old dear!" Betsy shook out her drying cloth. "Just for that I'll give you the nuttiest piece of ice cream or cake or fudge that turns up at the next treat."

"Sh! Footsteps approach!" Dicky held up a dripping finger.

Delia, the maid, was at the door. "Is Miss Barbara Wente here? There's a young gentleman in the library to see her, and Mrs. Martin said that she could go down without a chaperone."

"Oh! ho! ho! Babs has a beau!" Betsy began to tease when Delia had gone, but Barbara, crimson of cheek, had darted to her own room, to tidy up.

A very solemn-faced lad in the blue and gold uniform of Drexel Academy awaited Barbara in the library of Vine Haven Seminary.

"Benjy," the girl hurried forward with hands outstretched, "what has happened? You look—is it sad? Is your mother no better?"

The lad had risen when Babs entered. When they were seated he said, "I fear not. My mother has not been well for months and Harry writes that unless she is better soon he will send for me, as Mums so often talks of how happy she will be when this term is over and I can return home." Then, as he glanced out of the window and saw that snow was beginning to fall, he added, almost wistfully, "Spring seems a long way off, doesn't it?"

"But it isn't Benjy. Tomorrow will be the first day of March. This is probably to be the last snow

storm, and then, you know, after a few days of sun and rain, how soon the leaves and flowers appear. Strength seems to come with the spring, so please don't worry more than you can help."

The boy looked up brightly. "I knew seeing you would make me feel better. I wanted to come over last week when I first had the letter from Harry, but I couldn't. We were so busy over at Drexel. Even today I had little hope of coming until Dean Craig asked if one of the boys wished to drive with him to Vine Haven. We came over in his own private cutter with that thoroughbred horse that fairly flew."

Barbara looked around curiously. "Is Dean Craig here? I haven't seen him."

"Oh, no, he isn't in the seminary. He let me out and then drove down to the cabin in the Pine Grove. He is interested in the Manuscript Magazine that your Miss Torrence planned and he came to see about starting some such thing in our English class." Then he smiled in his frank boyish way. "Maybe the Dean is a bit interested in Miss Torrence herself. Is she young and attractive?"

"Oh, isn't she though?" Babs was enthusiastic. "She's the sweetest, dearest, lovablest young teacher in this school. Mrs. Martin is a darling, but of course she is elderly." Then, as she suddenly thought

of something, the impulsive girl exclaimed. "Here comes Virg from Pine Cabin this very minute. Wouldn't you like to see her, Benjy? She just loves to see people who are her neighbors out on the desert. Sometimes she gets powerfully homesick."

A slight expression of disappointment crossed the face of the boy. He had called just to see Babs, whom he thought the sweetest, prettiest girl in all the world, but since she was eagerly awaiting his reply, and expecting it to be in the affirmative, he could do not less than say, "Why, yes, of course I would like to see Virginia."

Barbara was already skipping to the long French window near which Virg was passing. Lifting the sash, she called, "Benjy's here and he'd just love to see you a minute."

Virginia soon appeared, although she well knew that Babs had exaggerated the lad's desire to see her.

Throwing back her Papago blanket of many colors on which snow flakes, lightly fallen, quickly melted, she advanced, her hand outstretched. "Benjy, but it's good to see someone from home!" Then, standing back, she looked him over admiringly. "You don't resemble a cowboy or a sheep herder much, do you?"

The boy was about to protest that he had no such

ambition, when Babs exclaimed, "Oh, but he will, won't you, Benjy, next summer when we are all together on the desert? I'd rather look like a real cowgirl than anything else."

The listeners smiled as they gazed at the dainty, Dresden China girl whose gold and pink and white prettiness suggested a fairy queen far more than a rough-riding cowgirl.

"We often wish to be what we aren't," Virginia began, then turned brightly to Benjy to exclaim: "Dean Craig arrived at Pine Cabin while I was there, and he was so interested in the Manuscript Magazine. He asked if he might borrow our one lone copy, and he said that, if we would trust it to him, next week he would send it back, and that it would be accompanied by as many more copies as we might request."

Babs' eyes were round and inquiring. "What is he going to do; set Benjy and the other boys to copying it, do you suppose?"

The lad laughed. "Indeed not. Drexel Academy is now the proud possessor of a printing press and your Manuscript Magazine will be the first thing in book form that we have made."

"Virg, won't you be the proudest ever to see your name printed after your story?" Then turning to the lad, Babs prattled, "Oh, Benjy, be sure to read

Virg's story. It's about the desert and it's the best ever."

"I know that I shall enjoy it," the boy rose as he spoke, for, around the circling drive a cutter, drawn by a high-stepping horse appeared. "Oh, isn't it a beauty—Virg, see how proudly it holds its head? Wouldn't you and Megsy and I love to have horses like that one out on the desert?"

"I wouldn't give my Comrade for any horse on this earth," Virginia replied. "He saved my brother's life, you know."

Then when the good-bys had been said, and Virginia had departed, Barbara lingered to say earnestly, "If you have news that saddens you, Benjy, come right over and see me. You haven't an own sister and so let's pretend that I am one." The lad gave the girl's hand a grateful pressure.

"Thank you, Barbara," he said, "I feel heaps more hopeful, somehow, that I did."

Betsy had planned teasing Babs unmercifully, but, when she saw the thoughtful, almost sad expression on the girl's face when she came upstairs she changed her mind and kissed her lovingly instead.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SPRING RIDE.

It was nearly the middle of March before a big bundle of printed Manuscript Magazines appeared at Vine Haven. Dean Craig did not bring it himself as the melting snow and frequent rains had made the cross country roads almost impassible, and so he had sent it by express, via Boston, which greatly lengthened its journey. Micky O'Brien was sent to the village to obtain it and great was the excitement in the library of the seminary when Miss Torrence assembled all the girls who were chiefly interested to be present at the official opening of the bundle.

"Oh Virg, doesn't your name look perfectly scrumptious on the cover?" "The Manuscript Magazine, edited by Virginia Davis!"

"Wouldn't I feel all spiffed up if my name were in it anywhere, even in the teeniest, tiniest print way off in a corner somewhere."

Miss Torrence smiled indulgently at the girl who felt that English as the King spoke it, was not expressive enough to embody the sentiments of an American school girl. "Keen stuff! Oh, I mean

it's a very nice magazine." Betsy actually looked embarrassed, but Miss Torrence was at that moment saying to Virginia, "You wanted one copy to send to Eleanor Pettes, didn't you? And one for Winona?"

"And, oh, I would love to have one to send to my brother Malcolm." "Of course, so you shall. Dean Craig wrote a little letter which told of the coming of the magazines that he would leave the type set until he received a message from us telling if we need more copies."

"Isn't he the nicest man?" Barbara, the ever impulsive, exclaimed; then she wondered why Miss Torrence's cheeks were suddenly like roses.

"I like him," was the reply. Then, as a gong, pealing through the school, told that lunch hour was approaching, the magazines were divided and away the girls trooped to the upper corridor to prepare for the noon meal.

"Did you notice Miss Torrence blushing when we mentioned the Dean?" Sally asked her roommate when Sweet Pickle Alley had been reached.

"Me? Nope, my belovedest! I have a mind above such things. I was sniffing the air just then trying to decide what savory thing was being prepared in the kitchen."

"Oh, Betsy, you are so tantalizing."

"And I decided that it was liver and bacon. If I am right, will you give me your share, Sal, old dear?"

That particular dish, as all the girls knew, was Betsy's favorite.

"Goodness no, much as I don't like it, I'm too hungry to give it away if that's all there is." But the menu that noon was of quite a different nature. However, Betsy always ate anything that was provided with a relish. "Girls," she confided, "Micky told me that the postman has bronchial fiditis and that he is to drive into town this afternoon and get the mail. It being Saturday and sunny, I thought perhaps we might get permission to ride in with him."

"I'd like that all right," Barbara smiled. "I was just wishing I could go out in this sparkling air and not get my feet wet."

Mrs. Martin was glad to permit them to accompany the gardener's boy and an hour after lunch, the school bus started down the hill road, filled almost to overflowing with laughing, singing, joyous girls, who felt that the holiday spirit was abroad.

"Watch out for a first robin!" Betsy shouted.

"Or violets," Barbara sniffed the warm earthy,

fragrant air. "I just know there are some over yonder in that ferny dell."

"More likely we'd find them in that sunny sheltered meadow or some fence corner."

When the town was reached, the girls tried to be more sedate. When the bus stopped at the post-office they could not decide which one should have the honor of going in to inquire for the mail, with Micky, who, of course, would be needed to carry out the pouch. Since they all wished to be the one selected, Betsy cried, "Let's compromise and all go."

This they did, tumbling out of the bus with such a merry rush that old "Si" Peters, who for years had sat all day long on the bench in front of the post-office, leaned forward on his cane and chuckled, although he chewed faster than ever, if such a feat were possible.

Betsy nudged Babs, as she nodded toward the old man who was a town character. "See how his chin beard points up," she whispered. "Honest Injun, I believe he's going to speak to us."

Nor was she wrong. "Good-day, gals! Be ye all from the seminary up top the hill?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Yes, we are," Virginia replied kindly. Virginia

was always kind to everyone whom she met of whatever station.

"Waal now, as nice a parcel o' gals as ever I did see," they heard him muttering as they trooped in to the general store bent on spending part of their hoarded allowance for striped bags full of candy.

The mail pouch was unusually bulky, and, as the girls rode back up the hill, they amused themselves by guessing which of them was to receive a letter. Suddenly, just as they reached the crest and were about to turn in between the seminary gates, Betsy Clossen gave a cry of joy, and leaped to her feet pointing. "See, there it is! Quick! Everybody wish on the first robin."

A flash of red from a tree near, and a familiar, though startled note, confirmed Betsy's remark. "I wish to pass A 1 in every subject on the spring exams." Sally surprised them all by remarking:

"Oh, I say, Sal, wish for something that could happen."

"Stick to it, Sally, you've improved worlds since Virg has been playing tutor." This from Babs.

"I wish my mother may find Aunt Dorinda," Eleanor began, when the bus stopped under the seminary portico and ten eager girls followed Micky as he

carried the pouch (which might contain a letter for them) up the steps and into the school.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HEART OF MISS SNOOPINS.

"Miss Snoopins is almost human sometimes, isn't she?" Betsy exclaimed as the girls, having received their mail, trooped upstairs to their rooms. "She actually smiled when Miss King called her and gave her a letter. I do believe it's the first she's had this term."

"Maybe it was only a bill, after all. I don't think there's anyone on this green earth who would care to write to her."

"Oh, Betsy!" Virginia protested. "There is someone to love everybody."

"You'll have to prove it to me. I don't believe—"

"Sh!" Megsy cautioned. She was last in line, and turning, she saw that Miss Buell had started up the stairway and feared that she might overhear. They proceeded toward the southeast wing almost in silence and were indeed surprised to hear Miss Snoopin's voice, close back of them, saying: "Miss Virginia,

can you spare time to come to my room? I'd like your help for a few moments."

"Indeed I can, Miss Buell. I have an hour of free time, and I shall be glad to give it to you."

Excusing herself, the girl turned down a narrow hallway at the end of which was the small room occupied by the monitress of the rooms and corridors. The thin, angular woman was plainly excited. On her usually sallow face two red spots burned. She drew forward a stiff-backed chair.

"Oh, Miss Virginia," she said, "I just had to tell someone—or—" She was plainly unable to complete the sentence, and so Virg said kindly:

"You have had good news, from some relative perhaps? I shall be glad to hear about it." But she was interrupted with: "No, 'tisn't a relative. Leastwise not by blood. I haven't any of those." Then eagerly: "There is a way, isn't there, by going to law or something by which folks can be made into real relations, if they aren't born so?"

"Why, yes, Miss Buell. Neighbors of ours on the desert adopted a boy and then he was their very own."

The eyes, that the girls had called green, were like wells of happiness. "That's what I wanted to know. Of course I could have asked Mrs. Martin, but she'd

have discouraged me, like as not, saying I had all I could do to save up a bit for my old age." Then, opening the envelope, she handed the wondering girl a kodak picture. "That's little Terry!"

Tears sprang to the eyes of Virginia. "Oh, Miss Buell," she said, "that poor little twisted body, but what a beautiful face he has! It makes me think of a painting I saw in the Boston cathedral when Miss Torrence took us up there for Christmas service. It's just as though his little soul were singing songs of praise."

Tears, all unheeded, fell down the sallow cheeks of the woman, who had been called unloved and unloving. "I believe he is! I sometimes think little Terry lives in a world the rest of us can't see."

"Tell me about him. Is it Terry whom you wish to adopt?"

Miss Buell nodded. "I was under-housekeeper at the Boston orphanage two years ago, and this little fellow—he was five then—was brought in. He was found on the steps in a basket after dark and the matron said they couldn't keep him. He was so twisted she thought he'd need a nurse all the time, and what was more, when he came to the age to be homed out, there wouldn't be anybody that would want him. Well, it was decided that he would have

to be sent somewhere else, but it being late evening they had to keep him till they could find where he could be taken. What to do with him that night troubled the matron. Then 'twas I stepped up and said I'd keep him in my room and be glad to. He was in awful pain all night, the little fellow was, and though he didn't cry out loud, he kept up a pitiful moaning, and his eyes looked scared, as though somebody'd hit him for it. But when I picked him up and held him close in my arms, he seemed to feel better, and by and by he went to sleep, but I didn't lay him down. I just held him there all night, and though my arms ached, there was a warm feeling in my heart. I just knew that it was love. The next morning, the matron said the proper authorities were coming to get him. I kept watching and when I saw the hard-faced woman in a blue uniform who came I just up and told that matron that I was going to keep the little fellow myself. The next day I was to leave there, anyway, so I took Terry with me and I asked in the city where was the place that crooked babies were made straight. They told me about a hospital. It cost a lot to have Terry taken in there, but I left him, and I've sent them all the money I've made here every month up to now.

"They've done lots for that little fellow. He can

walk some, and the nurses are teaching him to read and write. The doctor tells me if I can leave him there five years more he'll be about like other boys, excepting that he'll always have to wear braces."

"And are you going to try to keep him there for five more years, Miss Buell?" Virginia felt awed in the presence of such complete self-sacrifice.

The thin woman's face brightened. "Of course I am, but first I want to have Terry made into an own relation. Then when the time is up I'm going to take him back to my father's old farm. That's mine, clear, and Terry and I'll make it into a home"

Then the woman rose.

"Thanks," she said, "for coming in, but I've kept this shut up inside myself for so long I just wanted to tell somebody about Terry."

"Thank you for telling me," the girl replied, and then as she left the small room she suddenly recalled a joking conversation of the girls on the day she had arrived at Vine Haven. Babs had been telling about Miss Snoopins and had called her "heartless," but Virginia had declared that everyone had a heart, and Margaret had prophesied that if Miss Snoopins had one, Virginia would find it. How she did wish she could tell the girls. Some day perhaps she would

be given permission to do so. The others looked up wonderingly as she entered.

All Virginia said was: "I have found the heart of Miss Buell, and this much I will tell you, there is no one in this school who is living a life of greater self-sacrifice."

The girls, who had gathered in the corner room occupied by Margaret and Babs, were indeed surprised to hear that Virginia had found the heart of Miss Snoopins. But, since that maiden did not feel that she had a right to tell the sweet, sad story, they soon forgot about it in recounting their own news items that had arrived in the same mail pouch.

"Peyton is ever so eager to have us come home," Babs exclaimed as she glanced back at the open letter which she had been reading aloud when Virginia's entrance had interrupted. "Shall I go on?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, please do." The girl, whose home had always been on the desert (more than any of the others), was eager to have news from there.

"Begin over again, Babs." Megsy was on the window seat with her roommate. "Then Virg will better understand just what is happening in her home country."

And so Babs read. "Dear sister and friends:

"Malcolm and I have just returned from a ride

to the north. We have been hunting for cows with young calves that we might drive them in and brand them before they fell into the hands of rustlers. We were told that a bunch of cattle from V. M. had been seen not far south of the Wilson ranch and so we rode up there after them. We despaired of finding them, and were turning back to the south when that little Mexican chap with the long name, Francisco Quintano Mendoza, appeared. He seemed to rise right up out of the chapparal on that little wild broncho of his and he galloped toward us shouting frantically.

"We turned our horses and waited. He told us in broken English that Harry had sent him to herd our little bunch of stray cattle until he had an opportunity to drive them to V. M. and that he had them safe in a nearby hollow. Just at that moment Harry appeared coming down the canyon trail, and, as we had not seen him since Christmas, we were indeed glad to hear his news and have an opportunity to thank him for having protected our strays.

"Hal looked troubled. He is worried about his mother, but don't mention it to Benjy. They want him to finish out his year at Drexel if possible. He certainly is a fine chap. He inquired about you girls,

but especially about Winona. He seems to greatly admire that Indian friend of yours.

"It took us a day and a night to return to the ranch belonging to Barbara and Peyton Wente. Sis, I'll 'fess up that I haven't done a thing to the inside of that old house. I'm leaving it all for you to change to suit yourself.

"Malcolm said to tell Virginia that Uncle Tex spends most of his time this spring planning a surprise for his beloved 'gal.' "

"Dear old man," Virg said when Babs paused. "I wonder what it can be that he is making for me."

"Only two months more and then you will know."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BUSY APRIL.

THE month of April was a busy one in Vine Haven Seminary.

"Virg, what have you done to Sally MacLean?" Betsy inquired one Saturday morning. "I just now asked her to go for a hike with me and hunt for wild flowers. It's such a perfectly scrumptious day, so shiny and blue, but no, she just wouldn't budge. And

of all the stupid things that I left her doing, you never could guess."

"Oh yes, I could," the older girl replied, smiling at the piquant-faced little maid in a cherry colored sport coat and tam, who stood in her open door. "I am almost certain that Sally is translating Latin, because we are going to review the entire term's work on the Saturday mornings in April. Better join us."

"Me?" Betsy pretended to groan. "May the saints help the two of you. What in the world is old Sal trying to do? Get her name on the Honor Roll?"

"I hope so."

"Well, it's a lost hope. She never could do it."

"I'm not so sure of that," Megsy, who sat by an open window with her mending, smiled across at the speaker. "I did it and so did Babs." "Well, it's me as isn't even trying for it. Good! There's Dicky Taylor." With a farewell wave of her hand, Betsy skipped down the corridor calling, "I say, Dick, Virg hasn't hoodooed you into trying for the Honor Roll, has she? Put on your hiking togs and come out with me."

The other girl hesitated. "I don't suppose I could make the grade," she confessed, "but I'd heaps like to try. Our president said that nothing would please

her more than to have the names of every member of our little study club on the Honor Roll before the closing exercises. I hate to acknowledge that I haven't the brains or the perseverance that even Sentimental Sally possesses."

Betsy entered "The Sign of the Tea Kettle," and sat on the arm of a chair as she watched Dicky get out her books, pad and pencil.

"Are you going to dig into geometry on a spiffy Saturday morning like this?" she inquired.

"That's my plan, old dear." Dicky's words were merry, but it was plain that her intentions were serious.

"If confessions are good for the soul, I'll confide to you, belovedest. That one subject is my Waterloo. My name might decorate the blackboard in the lower corridor, if I could make head or tail out of geometry, but I can't! I'm nutty when it comes to that subject."

Dicky Taylor's face brightened. "I was just that way about it at first. I didn't think I ever could understand it, but when I knew I had to, or fail, I asked Miss King if I might stay after class and ask her a few questions, and, what do you think, it came to me all in a flash, sort of, and I believe I could make it clear to you, Betsy, if you have time to spare."

The cherry colored tam was tossed on a chair and the sport coat was removed. Then Betsy locked the door. "I don't want any of the bunch to catch me studying when I've kidded them all for doing it, but mind you, Dicky, even if I do dig in a while this morning, I'm not trying for the Honor Roll."

Half an hour later there came a tap on the closed door. Betsy motioned Dicky to keep quiet. Then a voice outside said, "Dick and Bets went for a hike I think." It was Sally who was speaking. Dora Crowell replied, "I wanted her to play singles with me. You come, will you Sal?" but that little maid shook her head and continued on her way to the room of Virg.

When the gong bidding the girls prepare for lunch rang, Betsy sprang up. "Dick," she pleaded, "don't you tell a soul that I studied geom all this morning. They'd think I was getting dippy, or that I was trying for the Honor Roll. Stuff and nonsense! I wouldn't have my name seen on it. No siree! 'Tisn't sour grapes," she retorted when her companion began to tease.

She opened the door to go to Sweet Pickle Alley and prepare for the noon meal, but she had lingered too long. A swarm of girls appeared without. "Oh,

no," Babs shouted. "Here's Betsy back from her hike."

"Did you find any wild flowers?"

"You've been up to mischief. You look as though we'd caught you in the act of stealing sheep."

Betsy broke through the group of tormentors and ran to her room. Hastily she tidied her hair, then joined the procession of girls who, two by two, under the surveillance of Miss King, were descending the wide stairway to the basement dining room.

As they passed the blackboard in the lower hall near the door of the principal's office, Betsy whispered, "Look at Babs admiring her own name."

"That's something you'll never be able to do." The speaker was Ethel Cummins, a girl whom Betsy especially disliked. Instantly she flared. "Indeed, is that so? Well, I'll have you know that my name is to be on that board before the closing exercises."

"Silence, young ladies, if you please!" Miss King was peering over her glasses as she looked back along the line to try to discover the offender but Betsy was at that moment passing with her head held high and a new determination plainly discernable on her usually laughing face.

How pleased her old dad would be if she could make the grade, she was thinking. "Erase the 'if' "

she told herself as she recalled how her father had often said. Perseverance spells success, little daughter, just remember that. Choose a goal! Go straight toward it and count every failure as a spur to greater endeavor."

But before that month was up, Betsy had many a moment of doubt.

CHAPTER XIX.

SPRING VACATION.

THE two weeks' vacation, which usually came at Easter time, had been postponed until May, the reason being that Mrs. Martin wished to visit Washington for a fortnight and attend the wedding of a favorite niece.

There was great excitement among the girls whose homes were not far away, as they packed their suitcases; often skipping from one room to another to tell some joyous plan they had in store for them. The brother of Dicky Taylor had written of a jolly house party they were to have in their summer home. "Mother is going with us and all of our eight cousins, so you can just bank on a dandy time."

Then there was a postscript. "Mums said for you

to bring along the twins, if you wish, and that will make ten. They'll keep things lively."

"YOUR BUDDY."

Cora and Dora were indeed more pleased with this invitation than Dicky was. "It's a curious thing," she confided to Virginia. "Last year I just begged Mumsie to let me bring the Crowell girls home for the spring vacation and she said, 'Some other time, dear.' Mums has remembered her promise and now I'd heaps rather have you or some of your crowd. I still like the twins, but their antics don't amuse me the way they did last year. I seem to have outgrown them, just as one does—well—dolls and toys."

"I understand, dear," the older girl said. "But suppose you think of it in a different way. Cora and Dora have had no home-life, I understand, since they were babies and that was too long ago for them to remember. They have been kept summer and winter in Vine Haven Seminary since they were four, and I am sure a fortnight in a real home will give them more happiness than it could any of the rest of us."

"I know it will," Dicky agreed brightly, "and I'll try to think of it that way. Their father-professor never pays them any real attention. When he does come to see them during the Sunday afternoon visit-

ing hour, he always tells them about his scientific discoveries. Dora declares she feels smothered when he is gone."

Great was the hustle and bustle, as the hour approached for the bus to take the first load of pupils to the station. The five girls whose homes were too far away to be visited for so short a vacation, were on the front porch to wave good-by to those who were departing.

"I say but I'm sorry for you, old dears!" Cora put her head out of a window of the retreating bus to call.

"Don't cry your eyes out with loneliness for us." Dora's merry face appeared beside that of her twin.

"We'll try to endure the separation," Betsy Clossen replied. Then as the stage was too far away for further conversation, even though carried on in shouting voices, the six girls on the porch turned and looked at one another.

"Well, we're here because we're here," Babs sang out. "Now the next thing is, what shall we do to while away the tedium (as the story books say), of the next two weeks?"

"With all of the teachers gone, like mice of fiction, we ought to do very much as we wish." Betsy swung herself up on the rail of the porch.

"I'm so glad Miss Torrence's mother was strong enough to ride in that comfortable closed car of her brother's to visit his nice home in Boston. She has three little grandchildren there and she has been so eager to see them." Virginia had seated herself on the top step of the wide front porch, and, leaning back, she breathed deeply of the warm fragrance-laden air.

"What a glorious day it is!" she said, smiling up at Margaret who stood at her side. "Do see our wonderful apple orchard. Isn't it just like a floating cloud of blossoms? I don't wonder that birds like to build their nests in those great old branches. Hark! Hear one of them singing as though he would burst his throat and just for the joy of living."

"Oh, good! Here comes the postman." Sally who had been sitting on the step lower than her idol, looked up glowingly.

A two-wheeled cart was turning in between the high gates and a thin, wiry horse was drawing the queer little equipage up the wide circling drive, in what the girls thought a most provoking leisurely manner.

The pleasant-faced postman beamed out from under his leather visor. "What, ho!" he called, when the horse had stopped under the portico. "Be you

all that's left out of the hurly-burly crowd of you?"

The girls trooped down the steps and surrounded the vehicle. Babs climbed up on the small step to peer into the opened bag, while Betsy attempted to leap up on the back board from the ground.

"Yes, we're all that's left and we need twice as many letters to console us," she remarked, when the feat had been accomplished.

"Wall, 't does seem like thar's an extra big batch this here mornin'. Where's that Miss King, teacher, who allays takes the mail pouch. I've orders, you know, to just give it to her or her representative. That's what Mis' Martin said, slow-like and plain as anything. Now what I'm wantin' to know, is any of you gals that representative?"

It was easy to see that the elderly rural postman was proud of his ability to use that word of many syllables.

At that moment, Mrs. Dorsey, the general housekeeper of the school appeared. "Just fetch that pouch right in here, Mr. Peters. I'll appoint Virginia Davis as mail custodian until Miss King gets back, so hereafter, if I'm not handy to find, just give it to her."

The elderly man climbed the steps of the porch and there deposited the pouch. Virginia looked up at

the open door to ask Mrs. Dorsey if she wished to sort the contents, but that middle-aged woman had bustled away, for, during vacation, the cook and maid had been permitted to leave, and so Mrs. Dorsey was busy preparing the lunch.

"Well, Virg, I guess it's up to you to do the honors." Betsy, kneeling down, opened the pouch and peered within, as she chanted:

"Leather bag, what do you hold?
Messages more dear than gold?"

Whirling, she pointed at Babs, who, knowing what was expected, quickly said:

"Leather bag, please yield for me
A letter from my brother P."

Turning quickly, she pointed at Margaret.

That maiden actually blushed. She had been wishing that the bag would contain a letter, all for her very own self from her guardian, Malcolm Davis whom she greatly admired, but she would not put this in a rhyme, and so she said:

"Leather bag, surely you've guessed,
I want a letter from the West."

Then she pointed at Sally:

"Leather bag, please give to me
A letter from someone over the sea."

The other girls looked their puzzled surprise at this request, as they had never heard that Sally had relations on the other side of the ocean.

"Suffering cats, Sally! You don't mean you wish you could have a letter from Donald Dearing, do you? He has gone to France to be with his dad, and whose photograph you used to have."

The pretty girl's denial was vehement. "Not at all," she declared. "I had to have something to rhyme with me and so I said sea."

Eleanor was saying with an eagerness that could not be hidden:

"Leather bag, more than any other,
Give me a letter from my mother."

"Betsy, for cricket's sake, don't begin that Round Robin Rhyme game again when we are in such a terrific hurry, because, according to its rule, we can't do anything else until its been around."

Virginia, having emptied the pouch, lifted a packet of letters. "Most of these seem to be for Mrs. Mar-

tin. I'll put them in on her desk," she said, suiting the action to the word.

Another pack was taken from the pouch. "Gimme one. Please, gimme one!" Betsy and Babs clamored with hands outstretched.

"Well, here is one for Miss Barbara."

"Hurray, it's from Peyton!" that maiden squealed. Adding, "Betsy, that rhyme must have been magic, for, see, I got just what I wished for."

But there was no letters at all for Margaret, but there was a very plump one from the West for Virginia. Too, there was a foreign looking envelope addressed to Eleanor Burgess, and Sally received a letter from her doting mother.

The empty pouch was hung in its customary place by the door of the principal's office, for, into it, all outgoing letters were to be dropped. Then, on the day following, when Mr. Peters brought more mail, he would take that pouch from its hook and start the letters on their journeys to widely separated destinations.

Eleanor, who was eager to be all alone when she read this pen-visit from her mother, excused herself and went down the steps and sat on a rustic bench in the blossoming orchard.

Sally and Betsy went to their own Sweet Pickle

Alley, while the other three girls sauntered down toward the cliff to read the letter from the desert. Although there was no especially exciting news either from Peyton or Malcolm, it meant much to those three girls to be transported even in imagination to V. M. ranch.

When the letters had been read, they sat in a row on the top of the steep cliff gazing down at the even roll of the waves far beneath them, for, as the tide was low, the surf was not crashing against the rocks.

Suddenly there was a growling noise in the underbrush back of them.

They all looked around almost startled, but it was Betsy Clossen's mischievous face that peered out at them.

The girls sprang up and surrounded the bushes. Sally was also there in hiding. "It's nearly lunch time," Betsy announced. "Come on, let's get Eleanor and storm the kitchen. Mrs. Dorsey likes me, and I'm going to ask her to let me have two helpings of dessert."

The five girls had started walking slowly back toward the orchard. "She will probably refer the matter to Virginia," Margaret said, to tease.

Eleanor looked up from the bench, where she was seated, when she heard merry voices nearing. Her

eyes were aglow with happiness. "Girls," she cried. "Think of it! Mother mine is now so well and strong that she can walk miles and feel no especial fatigue." Then, she added, as she joined them, "Poor little mother has had one real disapointment. She was so in hopes that when she reached the land across the sea, she might hear something of her sister Dorinda, or of her son. She did learn that my aunt's husband died many years ago, but that was merely from a report about foreign missionaries. It made no mention of the wife or son. Of course mother is the guest of Mrs. Warren and so she cannot visit the places where her sister's husband had lived. If only we could find the fortune which my grandfather Burgess hid, then mother would never have to work any more and she could search the world over for her lost sister."

"What?" Betsy leaped forward, her very expression an interrogation. "Is there a fortune hidden around here somewhere? Lead me to the place and I'll dig it up."

The others laughed. "So would we all, if we knew the place."

"Say, that would be a spiffy way to spend this two weeks' vacation. Let's hunt for Captain Burgess' buried treasure."

"It would be a waste of time," Eleanor said. "Mother, of course, has had experts search for it, and the final decision was that Grandfather was wandering in his mind when he wrote that and that he had hidden nothing at all."

"Another fond hope blasted," Betsy, the would-be detective said with so comically dismal an expression that the others laughed.

Then, just as they were about to enter the basement door, she whirled to announce: "Well, upon this much I am determined. Since we are members of The Adventure Club, we are going to start out this afternoon in search of an adventure." They were all amused by Betsy's nonsense, though they little dreamed that a real adventure awaited them that very afternoon.

CHAPTER XX.

RED FEATHER GUIDE.

Luckily Mrs. Martin had told Mrs. Dorsey, the housekeeper, to give the six girls who were to remain in the seminary during the short vacation, all the liberty they wished, permitting them to go on long hikes on condition that they would return in time for the evening meal.

Directly after lunch, following Betsy's suggestion, they donned their khaki hiking suits and started out, the would-be detective in their lead.

Suddenly she whirled about, and, holding up a staff which she had found when they passed through the grove, she announced in a mock-solemn tone: "Members of our adventurous band, we are setting forth without a plan, except to go where-ere we will and do what-ere we wish as long as our hearts find no wrong in it."

They had left the school grounds and were following a trail that had, at one time been made, it would seem, by pastured cattle.

"If we follow this path, we will come out in some farmer's barnyard, methinks," Barbara put in. "And surely that would not be an adventure."

"Oh, goodness, gracious! Don't do that, please! I'd rather meet a three-headed dragon any day than a cow." Sally looked so truly terrified that her companions laughed. All but Virg, who slipped an arm through that of the youngest member of their band. "If you had grown up with cattle as I did on the desert, you wouldn't mind them in the least. I never heard of a cow attacking anyone unless, indeed, someone tried to take away its calf."

They had reached the brow of a meadowland

knoll, and Margaret, looking over, announced: "Babs is right! There is a farm directly below here and this trail leads right to the neat red barn."

Betsy, with a little squeal of joy, pounced upon something that was caught in a bush. "Lookee!" she called. "Here is a scarlet feather fallen from some bird of passage. I have an idea! Let's toss it to the air again; let it fly away in the breeze, and follow where it leads."

As she spoke, the little red plume went soaring, and, as the breeze was a brisk one, it took the girls on a merry chase, for the little feather followed no trail, but led them through wiry grass and stubbly bushes away from both school and farm, and toward the sea.

"We've never been in this direction before," Margaret announced, when the feather dropped to the ground and the girls paused to rest. "That, in itself, is an adventure, I think, don't you?"

"I certainly do," Babs replied. "I've often wondered what lay beyond that rocky promintory over there. We can see it from our window. I think since we are so near, it would be all right for us to climb to the top of it and see what lies beyond."

"I can pretty nearly tell you," Betsy said, as she

picked up the little red feather. "A stretch of sandy beach, rocky cliffs and nothing more."

It was a hard steep climb that the girls had when they endeavored to scale the almost perpendicular side of the promintory which jutted from the mainland out into the shining blue sea.

Sally, more frail than the others, soon gave out and sank down on the rocks to rest. Eleanor and Barbara leaped back to help her. "Maybe I'd ought to have staid at school," the youngest girl said. "Maybe you'd have had a better adventure without me."

"Of course not," Virginia protested as she seated herself beside the other. "It's only two-thirty and we are not going anywhere in particular."

But even as she spoke Virginia had a strange feeling as though she had said something which was untrue. She could not in the least understand it.

The unwearied Betsy did not wish to rest. "On the alert," she called. "Hist! Dids't hear a noise on the other side of the cliff? I believe something or someone must be there. You all get your breath, while I climb up and look over."

"I'm rested now!" Sally smiled gratefully up at Virginia. "Let's all go on."

When the top was reached the girls peered over

When the top was reached . . . all they saw was a long deserted stretch of beach and a boat.
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and how Betsy did hope that something mysterious would be revealed, but, all that they saw was a long deserted stretch of beach and a boat, evidently a fishing smack, which seemed to be anchored near a dilapidated dock.

"No adventure in sight," sighed Betsy. "That feather was not a good prognosticator."

"Hear! Hear!" teased Barbara. "Wouldn't Miss Torrence be pleased as Punch if she knew that Betsy could use a word of more than one syllable?"

"Not that any of us know whether she used it correctly or not," she added, laughingly, to conciliate her bristling friend.

"What shall we do now?" Virg inquired. "Since there is nary an adventure below us on the beach, shall we retrace our steps?"

"It's only three by my little wrist watch," Margaret put in. "Don't let's give up searching for an adventure quite so soon. Betsy, where's that feather guide of yours?"

"Here it is, and there it goes." The little red plume again sailed in the air, then slowly fluttered downwards. A brisk breeze caught it, and the gleaming bit of red fairly rushed toward the broken old dock.

"Whizzle! Lookee! Will you? If it hasn't boarded

that fishing smack. Who's game to go down and take a look at the old boat?"

Sally, who dreaded nothing more than to be considered a doll-baby by Betsy, was the first to reply with a courage she did not feel. "I am," she said, "if Virg thinks we ought to."

But there was no time for the oldest girl to give the matter a deciding thought, for Betsy, with Babs closely following, was already fairly sliding down the seaward side of the promintory.

"Watch me, I'm a whiz at this sort of thing!" Betsy looked over her shoulder to call. Unfortunately for the boaster, when she was not watching, she stepped on a rolling stone, and went scudding the remaining way to the beach at a terrifying rate. Luckily she had not far to go. She sprang up, to Virginia's relief, and laughingly called, "Rather the worse for bumps, maybe, but what's an adventure without a mishap?"

Again, as she heard that word, there was in the heart of the oldest girl, a strange warning premonition.

"I think we'd better follow the beach until we come to a road leading into town and go back to the seminary," she said, addressing Margaret, especially,

for she could always depend upon her adopted sister to second her suggestions.

"Aw, I say! Let's play the game! We said we'd follow the little red feather and it went aboard that old boat. I'd like to take a peek at it."

They were starting across the beach and toward the water, when Margaret touched Virginia's arm and whispered, "Look over in the shelter of the cliff. There's a little old cabin. Maybe the fisherman who owns the boat lives in it."

"Maybe," Virg replied, "but it looks to me as though it had been long vacant."

They reached the little dock, which was sheltered from the pounding surf by a projection of the rocky promintory. Betsy was walking carefully out on the tottering beams and rotting cross boards.

"Watch your step, if you never did before," she sang out warningly. This caution was not needed for, most carefully the six girls proceeded Virg holding the arm of Sally.

Betsy, ever in the lead, had reached the part of the dock against which the boat was bumping.

Eleanor looked at it curiously. "Is it anchored or tied?" she inquired.

"Anchored, I should say," Margaret replied.

"Don't you see the rope hanging over the stern and into the water!"

"Of course." Betsy was climbing over the low rail. "All aboard, that's going aboard."

She was closely followed by Barbara and Eleanor, then Megsy climbed over, and Sally; last of all, Virginia, though much against her better judgment.

"We mustn't stay more than a moment," she told them.

"We won't," this cheerfully from Betsy. "Lookee! There's a sure enough cabin below decks." She was peering down into the dark hold. "I suppose the fisherman who lives in the cabin under the cliff has just returned from a fishing trip. He anchored his boat here while he went in to town to sell his catch." Then twinkling her eyes at Sally, she said, "I dare you to go alone down in that dark hole."

"Well, I *won't* take the dare," the youngest girl retorted with some show of spirit.

"I will." Babs was descending the rickety stairs even as she spoke, and Betsy clattered down after her.

"Oh, lookee! Here are two funny bunks that fold up against the walls," Betsy sang out to the girls who were still on deck. "Oh, I say, be game, kids. Come on down and see what a fishing boat looks like. You may never have another chance."

So Virginia and the other two girls descended. It took several moments for their eyes to become used to the dusk. Then. "Here are life preservers, but they're all crumbling to pieces. Even a drowning rat wouldn't find them much use," Babs remarked.

"Hark!" Virginia held up a finger and they all listened.

What's that swishing sound, do you suppose?" Her questioning glance was directed toward Margaret.

"The wind must be rising," that maiden replied. "We'd better get out of the boat. I've had adventure enough for one day."

"Seems to me I hear a queer kind of a scraping noise," Sally said.

Betsy was the first up on deck, then she called down the hatchway in alarm. "Girls! Girls! Come quick. What do you suppose has happened? The anchor must have broken off for we are drifting out to sea."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN UNEXPECTED CRUISE.

It was indeed as Betsy had said. "Oh, Virginia,

what shall we do?" Sally clung to the oldest girl, her baby-blue eyes wide with terror.

The president of The Adventure Club was as frightened as were the others, but she said with assumed calm, "Let us remember what Mrs. Martin has often told us. When an emergency arises, try to think clearly, and a way out of the trouble will be found. Now, whatever we do, don't let's lose our heads."

"I'm holding on to mine," the irrepressible Betsy said gaily, suiting the action to the words. Virg continued, "We have all had first aid training, but unfortunately Miss King never foresaw that we would be set afloat in a boat at sea."

"Of course one should put on life belts," Eleanor remarked, "but those that we found were but crumbling cork."

Because of the outgoing tide the boat was being rapidly carried away from shore. Virginia eagerly scanned the receding beach, then the cliff, but not a sign of life was to be seen. In the far distance she could see the tower of the seminary but that was at least two miles away.

The other girls were watching her, feeling sure that she would find some way out of their trouble. "We might shout, all together, and wave our colored

sweater coats, but I don't believe anyone would see or hear," Margaret suggested.

It was then that Eleanor noticed that there were no sails. "Girls," she exclaimed in dismay. "I was going to suggest that we put up the sails and return to the shore, but there aren't any. It's just a dismantled old hulk set afloat to sink, or fall to pieces. The incoming tide washed it against that dilapidated old dock, and the outgoing tide is now taking it to sea."

"And taking us with it!" wailed Barbara.

The six girls seated themselves on the benches under the rails and looked at each other in despair. Suddenly Betsy laughed. Her friends always said that she would laugh at her own funeral.

"Well, anyway," she announced, "we're having what we wished for. The Adventure Club is having an adventure."

Virginia, being the oldest girl and president of the club, felt that she was really responsible for all that had happened. "I ought to have insisted that we go back when I first felt—well—as though something was going to happen—something tragic."

Margaret looked up with interest. "Virg, did you feel that way? So did I, but I didn't want to spoil Betsy's fun by grumping about her plan."

"I'll take the blame, that is, I mean, with Mrs. Martin," that maiden said meekly, then added with her inevitable desire to tease. "Sally is the only one of us who is ready to die. She knows how to play a harp."

"What time is it, Megs?" Virg asked, then added, as the thought came to her, "You'd better wind your watch, dear. We'd feel so helpless if it ran down."

"If Winona were with us, she could tell time by the sun," Babs volunteered. "She gave me a few lessons. Wait a minute till I try." Then, a second later, she continued. "The month being May, I believe that it is now about four o'clock, since it is dark at seven."

"Right you are! It is two minutes to four." Megsy was winding her wrist watch as she spoke.

Luckily the old fishing smack had no water in the hold, and so, unsafe as it looked, it evidently did not leak.

"Which is one comfort, surely," Barbara remarked.

The boat had drifted beyond the shelter of the out-jutting promintory, and an increasing land breeze was blowing them steadily out to sea.

The gentle, even roll of the waves rocked the boat and poor little Sally was the first to become pale and

ill. This added to their anxiety. Virginia insisted that the youngest girl lie down upon the deck. With her own sweater, she made a rolled pillow while Megsy offered her sweater coat for a covering.

For a long hour the fishing smack slowly drifted. Suddenly Betsy gave a cry of joy. "Lookee! Look yonder! Surely that is a steamer. Let's all stand up on the seats and wave something. Maybe they will see us through their glasses and come to our rescue."

This they did, but the steamer, plying its way, many miles out at sea, did not veer from its course and soon disappeared in the fog that was slowly creeping shoreward.

"Virg, I don't believe I can keep calm much longer," Barbara said, turning toward the oldest girl, a pretty face that quivered. "I—I feel so terribly frightened deep inside."

"I know, dear, but we *must* keep up our spirits. It won't help in the least for us to cry, or get panicky. We want to be able to think clearly if the time comes to act." Virginia held the hand of Babs in a tight, comforting clasp. "My theory is that when the tide turns we will drift back to the shore again. We must help each other by trying to be brave. When something has really happened, it will be time enough to give up hope."

"Virg, you're a wonder!" Eleanor said admiringly. "I, for one, shall not give up hope until you do."

A grateful glance was the only reply the speaker received, and she was satisfied. But, during the hour that followed, it was very hard for Virginia to keep the younger girls brave and hopeful, for a dense wet fog settled about them, and the setting sun, after glaring red like a ball of fire in the mist, sank, leaving the unwilling voyagers hungry, cold and altogether miserable.

"Girls," Virginia said in a tone of authority, "I want you all to go down in the hold. At least it is sheltered there from this wet wind. I will stay on deck and watch for the light of a steamer."

Margaret and Eleanor protested. "Let three go down and three remain on watch for a few hours, then change about as real sailors do," Megsy suggested.

"Please let me do it my way." Virginia's voice sounded so imploring that the other girls went below decks, and, letting down the two old bunks, they huddled upon them to keep warm.

Betsy, bent on keeping up the spirits of her comrades, began to sing, but Babs hushed her. "Don't!" she begged. "You'll make me cry."

"I'll tell you what," Betsy stopped singing to sug-

gest, "let's each take a turn at crying, while one of us counts fifty. A girl always thinks she has to cry, and the sooner we get the tears spilled out, and done with, the better. Now Babs, one, two, three."

Betsy's monotonous recital of the numbers ended abruptly for Babs had laughingly clapped her hand over the mouth of her tormentor.

"I'm not going to cry, really. None of us are. We'd be ashamed to, with Virg so brave, up there all alone on deck."

For a while they were silent. The swish of the water against the sides of the boat had a lulling sound, and, one by one, the girls made themselves as comfortable as was possible under the circumstances, and went to sleep.

Meanwhile, Virginia, alone on the deck, knelt down in silent, strength-giving prayer. A fog-horn, from somewhere, sounded dismally at intervals. Margaret, unable to sleep long, soon slipped up on the deck, and, groping her way toward her friend, she sat close beside her and reached for her hand and so they sat, waiting, watching as the dark hours slowly passed.

New hope crept into the heart of Virginia with the coming of the dawn.

CHAPTER XXII.

LAND—BUT WHERE?

WITH the grey of the dawn, the fog again drifted out to sea and the sun arose in a glory of flaming color.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Virg said to the pale, weary girl at her side. "The God who has created the sun and the stars, and keeps them in their places, can also take care of us and I know that he will." Then she added very softly, "I wish the other girls might sleep longer, for, if they waken, they will be hungry and we have nothing to give them."

"I suppose poor Mrs. Dorsey is frantic because we have not returned," said Megsy, also in a whisper. "I am truly sorry for her, but I do hope that she won't wire Mrs. Martin and spoil her long planned vacation."

"No fear of that, for, directly after the wedding, Mrs. Martin was to go with her brother and sister on an automobile trip visiting many interesting places, and, returning with them to Vine Haven at the close of the vacation. I heard her tell Mrs. Dorsey not to try to forward her mail as she would

have no definite address. However, Mrs. Dorsey will, of course, notify the town authorities and they will begin to search for us, but they will not dream that we are lost at sea since we started out to hike across country."

For a moment Margaret silently watched the East. Then she said: "Virg, if it weren't for the real danger that we are in, I would be glad to have this opportunity of seeing such a wonderful sunrise. The very water seems to be of molten gold."

"It is awe-inspiring," the older girl replied. "I feel as though we were in the very presence of the Creator."

A bank of shining mist was just ahead of them. "It is the very same that I have seen from Pine Cabin," Virg remarked, "and dear old Mrs. Torrence often said that she believed it to be an island, which looked misty because of the distance, and once, when the air was unusually clear, I actually believed that I could see its rocky outlines."

The two girls, who so loved each other, walked toward the bow of the old boat, and with eyes shaded, gazed ahead through the shimmering air.

"We must have drifted far in those long hours of the night," Margaret said. "We have much to be thankful for that we did not run upon a shoal."

Suddenly the speaker clutched the arm of her companion. "Virg, after all, we must be drifting back toward the shore. See, there is land in that cloud of mist. Can't you see it? I can plainly make out trees and rocks."

"It is indeed land," Virginia replied, a prayer of gratitude in her heart, "but not the land that we left yesterday, and, what is more, I believe it is an island. A very long one, it would seem, but I think that I can see both ends of it." Then after a moment. "Oh, I'm so afraid that we are going to drift beyond it."

At that moment Barbara appeared on deck, and, noting the excited faces of her two friends, she asked eagerly, "What has happened?"

When she heard that Virginia was afraid that they would not drift to the island, Babs exclaimed, "Girls, surely there is a rudder! Peyton taught me how to steer his sail-boat the year before he left home." Even as she spoke, she was hurrying to the stern. The rudder handle was swinging aimlessly.

At Barbara's firm touch, the boat responded and swung around, heading in the direction toward which Virginia was pointing.

The other girls appeared on deck and were overjoyed to see land, which, as the sun rose higher, and

the fog lifted, was plainly discernable, not more than an eighth of a mile ahead of them.

They were soon near enough to see that it was a large, rocky island with a densely wooded hill rising high in the middle of it. Too, there was a long stretch of deserted beach shining white in the sun.

"I don't see anyone about," Eleanor said, making field glasses of her hands, "but then it is very early. Perhaps the inhabitants are not yet astir."

"Megsy, stand in the bow, will you?" the girl at the rudder called. "Sometimes, as one nears land, there are almost hidden shoals. Keep a close watch ahead, and, if you do see one, motion which way I am to steer."

Eleanor joined Margaret in the bow of the boat and they gazed anxiously into the water, over which the boat was slowly drifting. Suddenly Megsy waved frantically to the left. Barbara pushed on the rudder with all her strength, but it was too late. The boat slid up on a wide flat submerged shoal.

There was a cry of alarm from the younger girls, but Virginia calmed them. After looking into the water, she said, "We are in no immediate danger. Now, let us think calmly just what may happen and what we would better do."

"I was noticing, when we let down the bunks in

the hold, that the boards were loose. I think we would better each get one to cling to, if we found ourselves in the water." This from the thoughtful Eleanor.

"I agree with you," Virginia said, "for although we seem to be well-grounded, it is very probable that a hole has been made in the bottom of the boat. If larger waves come in, we will be lifted from the shoal, the hold will fill with water and the boat will sink."

Even Sally, relieved because the rocking motion had ceased, went with the others below decks. They soon reappeared dragging boards, one at a time. They were not as easy to procure as had been supposed. Indeed, within the hour that followed, only three had been brought up on deck. It was then that Eleanor made a discovery. "The water is leaving the shoal," she announced. "Before many minutes I do believe that we will be high and dry."

Almost breathlessly the six girls leaned over the rail and watched the shoal.

"The tide has turned," Virginia said. "It does, you know, every twelve hours, and it is just about that long since we started out on this voyage."

Margaret, who had been intensely gazing at the shore, now exclaimed: "Girls, do you know what I

think? I believe that we are stranded on the outer edge of a shoal that goes right up to the island, and that, in a few moments, it will be above water. Then we can land."

Fifteen minutes later Margaret's prophecy was fulfilled. Virginia rejoiced at this, for they would all be able to desert the craft, which she no longer considered a safe haven.

"I'll climb over first," Betsy volunteered, "and if I can walk to the shore without slipping in the briny deep, the rest of you may safely follow. First of all, let's remove our shoes and stockings."

Virginia remained in the boat until all the others had climbed out and were well on their way to the shore. Margaret, standing on the shoal, was waiting for her, when suddenly she uttered a cry of alarm.

"Virg! Hurry up, quick! The boat is slipping out with the tide."

And so it surely was. Lightened of nearly all its load, the old hulk was once again afloat. Virginia leaped over the rail and was caught by Margaret's outstretched hands. They had to cling to each other a moment to regain their balance. Betsy, having heard the cry, ran back toward them.

"The boat!" she ejaculated. "Why, it's sailing away! Lookee!"

The other two girls nodded. "We know it well enough," Megsy informed her. "Our darling Virg nearly sailed away on it."

"Don't tell the others, please," the oldest girl pleaded. "Since all is well, there is no need to trouble them."

They were nearing the shore when Barbara, who was sitting there, pointed excitedly back of them. "Girls! See what we've escaped." Virginia, Margaret and Betsy looked back of them and beheld the old hulk slowly sinking in the deep water beyond the shoal.

"Talk of adventure! I never heard of so much outside of a book!" Barbara declared. "That's what might be labeled a 'hair breadth escape.' "

Virginia looked about her. "Well, at least we can't drown here," she said, "for, instead of water, we have a wide deserted beach, rocky cliffs and a dense woodland."

"But we may be eaten by cannibals." It was the first time that Sally had ventured a remark since landing.

"Luckily there are none in these civilized parts," Babs replied. "Now, girls," she continued, "let's hold a council and decide what we are to eat for breakfast."

"Goodness, yes, let's! I'd almost as soon drown as starve." This from Betsy, who, having seated herself on a rock, was putting on her shoes and stockings. The others did likewise. Megsy, saying dolefully the while, "We might hold twenty councils, but pray, how would that procure us anything to eat?"

"There may be a fisherman living on this island." Virg hoped she was a prophet, but was almost convinced that she was not. The island was too remote to be accessible to the markets.

Betsy, again on her feet, put one finger against her forehead as though in deep thought. "Idea!" she then sang out.

"Let's hear it, old dear." Babs felt her spirits greatly restored now that her feet were on dry land.

"When I was a little kid I read 'Swiss Family Robinson' seven times and I now recall a few of the ways that were resorted to for the obtaining of sustenance."

"Shooting stars, Betsy! You must have swallowed the book whole when you finished reading it. You talk just like it." It was of course Babs who was taunting her friend.

"I did!" Betsy solemnly looked about. "If the

worst comes to the worst, we can build a house in a tree, the way they did, and—"

"Begin on the eats, old dear. What did the Swiss family do when they were hungry?"

"They—er—" It was plain Betsy's memory needed considerable searching.

"Oh, yes, they dug clams." This, with a sudden brightening expression on her piquant, freckled face. Then she laughed as she confessed, "I haven't the vaguest notion how it was done."

"I have!" Barbara was glad that she and Peyton had spent a summer on the coast when they were a boy and girl. "First you hunt around for a little air-bubbly-hole on the sand at low tide and then dig down and get the clam."

"Just so easy!" Betsy laughed. "Come on, everybody. Hunt for air holes."

But it wasn't so easy after all. Now and then one of their number would leap toward what seemed to be an air-hole, dig frantically; then give up as a clam was not revealed.

"I've heard of stranded travelers living for quite a time on birds' eggs." It was Eleanor who made this suggestion.

"Well, I, for one, can climb trees." Betsy started to race toward the woods, and the others followed,

but once among the great old trees, they paused.

"I haven't seen a sign of a footprint of any kind," Virginia remarked, "so I conclude that we have this island very much to ourselves."

But Virginia was mistaken for at least one dweller of the island was crouched in a nearby tangle of bushes and a pair of dark eyes watched every move made by the six invaders.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FAIR EXPLORERS.

INTO the pleasant woods the girls went, Betsy, of course, in the lead. Sometimes there were open places among the trees where they could walk easily, but, at other times, they came to tangles of bushes that were very difficult to break through.

Suddenly the leader paused and held up a warning finger. "Hst!" she whispered in the dramatic way she seemed to enjoy," I thought I heard sort of a rustling noise in the bushes over there."

"It might be snakes—" Barbara began, when Sally uttered a piercing scream. "I stepped on one! I know I did!" she was screaming hysterically.

"No, you didn't. That's only a big stick. Here,

give it to me. I remember now, in Swiss Family Robinson, when the boys went through dense underbrush, they pounded the bushes ahead of them to frighten away snakes and other wild creatures."

They moved forward, but it was Virginia herself who soon called a halt. "Girls," she said in a very low tone, "it may be my imagination but ever since Betty spoke, I, too, keep hearing a rustling noise back of us. It stops when we stop, then begins again when we start on."

"I believe we are being followed," Betsy turned to say. "I remember how tigers and things used to trail after the Robinson boys, waiting for a good chance to spring out and eat them."

At that Sally just sank right down on a stump and began to cry. Virginia tried to comfort her. "Dear," she said, with a pleading look at the tormentor. "Betsy is just trying to tease. You know, Sally, as well as we do that there are no tigers near Boston. I ought not to have mentioned the rustle I heard. I thought it might be a squirrel or some harmless little wood animal—"

"That we might catch and eat instead of its catching and eating us," Babs said cheerily. Then she called the command: "Procession, proceed!"

Virginia, the last in line, looked back when the

rustle began again, but because of the density of the leaves she could not see the little creature that was indeed following them with bright eyes that never permitted them to get out of sight.

"How imaginative we are becoming," Barbara remarked. "That surely ought to please Miss Torrence."

"I say, Virg," Betsy, in the lead, stopped swinging her big stick to call, "ask me to write a story for your next Manuscript Magazine, will you? I'll name it 'How six shipwrecked girls perished on a deserted island.' "

"If we're going to perish," Sally said dismally, "I guess we won't be writing compositions about it."

They had been climbing the wooded hill which they had seen from the boat and when they reached a clear place on the summit, they saw far below, on the other side, a sheltered valley-like depression which had a narrow opening toward the sea.

"Oh, how picturesque this place it," Virginia exclaimed. "If I were sure that some day we would be rescued, I would be glad that we had had an opportunity to visit this island."

"Me, too," Betsy chimed in ungrammatically as she delighted in doing. Then, as she sank down on the soft mossy ground to rest, she remarked: "Girls,

we started out with the avowed purpose of hunting for the fortune hidden by Eleanor's grandfather, Captain Burgess, but, as an adventure, I do believe even such a search is backed off of the map."

Eleanor laughed as she leaned against a tree. "It is indeed, especially since, as I have told you, my grandfather probably wrote that note just to cause anxiety for those who were left. I am not at all sure that he ever had a fortune to hide. Of course he owned the fine old place on the County Road, and mother and her sister Dorinda had every comfort provided for them, but they were never given any money to spend."

"If there was a fortune, it would rightfully belong to your mother and to her sister Dorinda." Babs lying flat on the ground with her hands clasped under her head, remarked.

"Yes, of course. I had a boy cousin whom I would so like to see. Mother is trying hard to locate him. He and I would have a share in the money, I suppose, if there were any."

"Whizzle." Betsy leaped to her feet. "Here it is mid-morning and we haven't had a bite to eat since yesterday noon."

"I'm thirstier than I am hungry," Barbara remarked, as they began the descent.

Virginia turned her head to listen and to her unexpressed delight that strange rustling sound which had suggested that they were being followed was no longer to be heard.

"After all, it was my imagination," she had just decided, when there was a joyful shout from Babs, seconded by one from Betsy. They had scrambled down into a little dell, which looked especially green and inviting, and there they had found a spring of clear, cold water.

The older girls were overjoyed at this discovery, for well they knew that one could live longer without food than without water. One by one they knelt among the ferns to quench their thirst. Virg made a mental note of the location of the spring that they might return to it later, if they so desired.

Even Sally became more optomistic when her thirst was quenched. Betsy and Babs were running a race down the last gentle slope of the hill, and so they were quite a distance ahead, when the girls following saw them stop suddenly, then Betsy dropped to her knees and began examining the ground.

Leaping up, she beckoned frantically for the others to make haste. It was plain that the two girls were much excited.

Eager to know the cause of it, the other four started on a run.

"What is it?" Virg called as soon as they were near enough. "What have you found?"

For answer Betsy pointed at the black wet soil down which water from the spring trickled. The prints of small bare feet were plainly to be seen. After examining them for a moment, Virginia exclaimed glowingly. "It is surely the print of a child's foot, which means that we were right in believing that a fisherman lives on this island. Perhaps even now, we are near his cabin."

The oldest girl sincerely hoped that the dwellers on the island might be fisher folk, but well she knew that sometimes smugglers and even outlaws hid among seldom frequented islands off the coast.

Betsy, delighted to have something to detect, was following the way the foot-prints led and soon they beheld before them a sheltering wall of rocks, and nestled close to it, as though for protection, the oddest kind of a dwelling. It had been crudely fashioned with small logs laid one on another, fastened to upright trees at the four corners by stout reeds that had been procured from some swamp. The roof was thatched with interwoven branches and a door, similarly constructed, was closed and fastened. There

were no windows to the house and the owner was evidently away.

"Maybe it was made by savages," Sally ventured. "There's a picture something like it in the big geography on the page that tells about the South Sea Islands."

"And there is a crude outdoor open," Babs pointed, "and right by it are scooped out stones and big shells as though they were cooking utensils."

Virginia gazed about for a thoughtful moment, then she said, "I'm almost inclined to think that whoever lives here has been shipwrecked like ourselves, and so, of course, he would have to resort to primitive methods of building and cooking.

"Look!" Babs clutched Virginia in real terror. "The door of that queer hut opened a crack. I'm just ever so sure it did, and I know that I saw eyes peering out at us."

"What if it's some shipwrecked sailor who has gone crazy from living so long alone?" Sally began, frightening herself more than her listeners with her fancy.

"Sh! The door is opening again." Betsy walked boldly toward the hut and then she smiled and nodded as though she were talking to someone, as indeed she was. "Don't be afraid of us!" Could the girls

believe their ears. "We won't hurt you. Come out and get acquainted." That was what Betsy was actually saying.

The door again opened, and this time it did not close and out of the house stepped the queerest little creature imaginable.

"It's a dwarf," Sally began, but Virginia was hurrying forward.

"It's a little child," she said, and indeed it was. A small girl with a mat of long tangled hair and a dress made of a burlap bag with openings that had been haggled in it for arms. Her eyes were dark and very bright.

"I'm not scared of you," she said, as she walked toward the girls. "I saw you long ago when you first came ashore. I was over there looking for May apples. I followed after you part of the way, then I darted down here to hoist the flag up there on the rocks. That's to tell my brother to come ashore quick. He won't know what's happened. He'll think something has scared me and so he'll come in a hurry."

Virginia decided that the girl was older than she had at first supposed, and in answer to the question usually put to small children, she unhesitatingly answered, "I'm eight, going on nine." Then gleefully,

"Won't brother be surprised though. He's catching fish for our dinner." She started running toward the shore, then turned to inform them. "Here he comes now. Oho, Winston! Here's some girls."

A small raft had appeared and on it a tall graceful lad was standing. With a long stout pole he was pushing his craft toward the beach. There he made it fast, by driving other stout sticks through the two corners that were high and dry, then taking up a long reed on which fish were strung, he shouldered a pole and started on a light run toward the wondering group.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE NATIVES.

"ARE you an apparition?" the boy smilingly inquired, when he was near enough to speak. "It is hard for me to believe my eyes." Then, before the girls could reply, the lad was eagerly asking, "Have you come in a boat that is anchored nearby, and will you take little sister and me over to the mainland?"

Virginia, being the oldest, stepped forward and held out her hand, smiling in her frank, friendly way. "I wish that I might reply in the affirmative," she said, "but that I cannot do, for we are ship-

wrecked, as I suppose you are also." Then she told of their recent adventures, ending with, "But I am sure that we will soon be found by the Vine Haven authorities. This island cannot be far away, and so in time their search ought to lead them here."

"I sincerely hope that they will for all our sakes," the boy declared, "but before I tell you of the misadventures which led to Peggy and my being shipwrecked, I shall cook these fish for I am sure, if you have had nothing to eat since yesterday, that you must be nearly famished." Then, he added, with a smile that assured the girls that he was just the kind of a lad Megs could depend on, he said: "Permit me to introduce my little sister, Mistress Peggy Wentworth. My own name is Winston."

Virginia then told the first name of each of the six girls. "You never could remember so many last names, and so there is no need to tell them. Now, what can we do to help prepare the fish?" Then Virginia hesitated. "Although it doesn't seem quite right for us to eat up your supplies."

The boy laughed. "Luckily for us, this particular kind of a small fish seems eager to be caught. I can get as many as I want. I'll rig up some more lines and we can all go fishing when our larder gets empty."

"That boy has been well brought up, hasn't he?" Eleanor said to Margaret, when they had left the group to search for sticks for the fire.

"Yes, indeed. And isn't he good-looking?"

"Little Peggy would be a beauty if she were prettily dressed and had her hair cut."

At another time Sally, the pampered darling of an idolizing mother would have scorned such coarse fare, but she ate her share at the strange banquet which soon followed as though it were the most delicious kind of food.

Luckily there was enough to satisfy even the ravenous appetites of the guests, then each was given a large shell and told to go to the spring for a drink. Laughingly they trooped along to the ferny dell, while their host remained behind to bury the bones.

"Winston," Margaret said, when they returned, "we are all curious to know how you happened to be here. Will you tell us?"

"Yes, willingly," was the reply, then the lad slipped an arm about his little sister as though it were a comfort to have her close, when he told, what the girls knew from his expression, would be a sad story. "My father having died," he began, "my mother, Peggy and I set sail in a merchant ship bound for a

port in the South where we were to make our home with my father's brother. That was last December. There were constant storms and at last the captain told the few passengers that the boat might flounder at any time. My first act was to fasten a life belt about mother, who, not being well, kept to her cabin.

"Little sister had gone up on deck, although a gale was raging and the waves were so high that each one seemed about to break over the deck and engulf us. I was terrorized to see that she had made her way to the bow, and having reached there was afraid to return. Clinging to the rail, she turned toward me a white, pleading face. At that moment the boat tipped so far over that the deck seemed almost perpendicular. 'Hold fast, Peggy!' I shouted. I clung to a corner of the cabin until the vessel righted. Then I ran across the unsteady deck and hastily fastened about her the belt I had carried. As I stood up, I heard her scream. She was pointing back of me. I turned and saw a roaring, rushing wave that lifted its angry crest high about the deck. I knew that nothing could save us, but instinctively I caught little sister in one arm and held hard to the rail with my other hand. I tried to shelter her from the torrent of water that surged over us. With tremendous force it hurled us against the rail which instantly snapped

and in another moment we were both being whirled about in the seething water back of the boat. No one had seen us, and, even if they had, the merchant ship could not have been turned to come to our rescue. I still held my sister's dress and with the other hand I was clinging to the part of the rail which had broken, permitting us to fall overboard. For a time we were driven along at an almost breathless speed by the next mountainous wave. At the crest I looked back and was glad to see that the boat had righted and still had a chance of making port, but I have since doubted that, as surely our mother would have had the coast searched for us. Luckily I am an excellent swimmer. I put my sister's arms over the rail and then swam or floated until at last we found ourselves in calmer water. This assured me that a harbor had been reached.

My feet soon touched bottom, then, on the next wave, we rode high on the beach, remaining there when it had receded. Since then I have had to recall all that I have read and use a good deal of invention besides, but we have managed to keep alive. Several times I have caught a glimpse of what I believed might be mainland, but I never have been quite sure enough to risk the life of my little sister by venturing out on our small raft. It is none too

securely made, as reeds are all that I had to lash together the logs."

It was very hot in the little sheltered hollow and Sally's head was nodding by the time that the tale was told.

"Poor girl," Virg said softly, "she has been terribly frightened, but she has been very brave, I think."

"You all look tired and sleepy," the boy rose as he spoke. "I am now going to take Peggy out on my raft for we will need many more fish for the evening meal. Tomorrow you may have a turn," he assured Virginia before she could voice the protest that he knew was coming, "but right now I want you to all sleep, for at least two hours. Go in our house if you wish."

But Virginia declared that the warm sandy ground made a good bed. Indeed, as soon as they saw the raft bobbing on little waves in a sheltered harbor, they all lay down and were soon sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SEARCH STARTED.

MEANWHILE in Vine Haven Seminary a nearly frantic housekeeper had, as Virginia had prophesied, reported to the sheriff that six girls had started out

on a hike at one o'clock of the day before and had not returned. It was then eight in the morning. Mrs. Dorsey's hope had been that the girls had wandered so far from the school, that they had decided to remain in some sheltered place and return by daylight in the early morning.

Not knowing how she could reach Mrs. Martin, the poor woman had put in a call for Drexel Academy and when Dean Craig replied, she had told the circumstances in such a breathless, excited manner that it was hard for him to understand just what had happened, but he did gather that Mrs. Dorsey wished as many boys as he could spare to come at once to Vine Haven to help the sheriff search for someone who was lost.

Benjy Wilson happened to pass the Dean's office at that moment, and, hearing his name called, he went in.

"Oh, Dean Craig," he implored, "I beg of you, permit me to go. Two of the girls, who were to remain at the school during their spring vacation, are neighbors of mine in Arizona and I couldn't do a thing here not knowing what trouble they may be in."

"I quite agree with you, Benjamin," the serious young officer replied. "Take two boys with you, any

two that you believe would aid you the most, and ride at once to Vine Haven. You may take my car, I shall not need it."

Scarcely more than an hour elapsed before the three boys dressed in their hiking togs appeared on the wide veranda of the Vine Haven Seminary.

A red-eyed, though pale housekeeper, admitted them. "I haven't slept a wink, nor eaten either, and I never shall, I'm thinkin, unless we can find those girls," she said, when she had finished telling them all she knew about the girls' departure on the day before.

Benjy was most courteous. "Mrs. Dorsey, do not be so worried. I feel confident that they are safe somewhere. Virginia Davis is an unusually capable girl, as you know, and so are Margaret Selover and Barbara Wente. I am sure they can take care of themselves in any ordinary circumstances. Now if you will tell us in which direction they first went when they left the school, we will start out at once in search of them."

Mrs. Dorsey felt comforted by the lad's optomism and told all she knew, which was very little.

"That Betsy Clossen, she as is always thinking up mischief, told me they were an Adventure Club, and that they were starting out to hunt for an adventure.

I said 'twas all right as long as they were home before dark. I stood and watched them a spell and they headed for the dairy farm over in the valley, but, by and by, they dropped out of sight below the top of the hill and I went on with my work."

Benjy rose as did his two companions.

"We will start in that direction, Mrs. Dorsey. Perhaps at the dairy farm there may be someone who saw them pass."

"No," was the doleful response. "The sheriff rode in a bit ago, just before you came it was, and he said he and his men had been there and everywhere in this neighborhood, for that matter, that is, everywhere 'ceptin' over the Wall o' Rocks Promintory. The sheriff said there was no use looking there as school girls wouldn't even think of trying to climb over it. Well, I sure wish you luck. I'll keep watching out for you to come back. I'll have plenty to eat waiting for you."

Benjy was indeed sorry for the good woman who was so crushed by the disappearance of the girls. As soon as the three lads were beyond the confines of the school grounds, Benjy paused. "That Wall of Rocks Promintory is about two miles from here," he told his companions. "Some of us from Drexel went

there last year on a cross country hike. I remember how very steep it was. I have little hope of finding the girls there, and choose it merely because the sheriff mentioned that his men had searched everywhere else."

Jack Dennison and Dick Beardsley, who were the particular friends of Benjy's at the military academy agreed that the promintory would not invite the ordinary schoolgirl to scale its jagged and almost perpendicular side. When the top was reached, they stood looking down at the beach that was gleaming in the sunlight. Jack was the first to notice the small hut close to the base of the cliff. Smoke was rising from the chimney and Benjy cried: "Down the trail, boys, and let's find out what we can from whoever may be there."

The occupant of the old hut was an ancient fisherman who sat in the shade mending nets. He looked up when he saw the three boys approaching, and, taking his clay pipe from his mouth, he inquired: "Wall, lads, be ye comin' fer fish? If so, help yerselves. Had a big haul last week."

Then, noting their anxious expressions, he added: "What's up? Anything wrong?"

Benjy told of the disappearance of the six girls who had started in that general direction on a hike.

Then eagerly, "You didn't see them anywhere around here on the beach yesterday, did you?"

The old man shook his head. "They might o' been, now, for all that," he said. "It's me as wasn't here. I've been gone down the coast fishing the week past."

He nodded as he spoke toward the dilapitaded dock, and the boys, glancing in that direction, saw an old boat there with patched sail so soiled that it was hard to believe that it might once have been white. "Ye can take The Nancy and cruise along the shore, if ye think 'twill help ye any. I won't be wantin' to go fishin' again for many a day I'm thinkin'.

"Thank you," Benjy said. "We will pay you well if we decide to accept your offer." Then the three lads walked slowly toward the old dock. "If only we had some clue," Dick was saying, when Jack leaped forward, beckoning excitedly. "Here's a red feather," he cried. "Don't you think it might have blown off a girl's hat?"

He picked it up as he spoke. "Oh, I don't think so," Benjy began, "and yet, maybe it might."

"There's a brisk breeze blowing beyond the shelter of the wall of rocks," Dick announced. "I vote that we do take the old fisherman's boat and scud up and down the coast. The girls may have been stranded

somewhere by the tide. I've read stories like that, and they were founded on fact."

"So have I," Benjy agreed. "It might be a good bet."

And so it chanced that the three lads set sail in the old boat Nancy just as the girls, whom they were searching, were sitting down to partake of a fish dinner on an island which could be seen, but dimly from the mainland.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MESSAGE AFLOAT.

The girls awakened, greatly refreshed from the nap they had taken, lying on the warm sunny sand, while Winston and Peggy had gone fishing to provide food for the next meal. It was two-thirty by Margaret's faithful wrist watch when they arose and sauntered down to the shore. They saw the small raft returning and by the merry shouting of Peggy, they were sure that the catch had been a large one.

When the queer craft had been secured on the beach, Virginia said, "Winston, we girls were just thinking that we would like to go to the side of the island on which we landed, make a fire or in some

way attempt to attract attention of the people on the mainland, who, we are sure, must by this time have started out in search of us."

"Righto!" the lad cried, then leaping ahead of them, he disappeared in the hut, to soon return with a bottle. "I dug this up yesterday on the shore and I planned using it in a way that might bring help to my sister and me."

"Oh, I know!" Betsy clapped her hands gleefully. "You planned writing a message, enclosing it in an air-tight bottle and setting it afloat. Wasn't that it, Winston?"

"The very thing, and let's do it now. I have a pencil," the lad said, producing a well-worn stub.

"What shall we do for paper?" Eleanor had just asked, when Margaret answered her: "Birch bark makes the best kind of paper. I saw a tree on the edge of the little wood."

"True enough," Winston exclaimed, as he bounded away, returning a few moments later with a strip of bark. The message was written, placed in the bottle and securely corked.

"I wish we had something to tie on the neck of the bottle to make it more noticeable," Virginia began when Betsy snatched a cherry red ribbon from her hair. "The very thing!" the lad exclaimed. "Now,

let's cross the island. There is a much shorter way than that by which you came." "Hurray for us!" the lad cried half an hour later, when they stood on the shore near where the girls had landed. "Luck is with us! The wind and tide are just right to carry our message rapidly toward the mainland."

Taking off his shoes and stockings, Winston waded far out on the shoal and then he lightly tossed the bottle into the deep water beyond. It partly sank, then rose. The wind caught in the loops of the red ribbon bow making sails that soon carried the bobbing bottle out of their sight.

"I have often made a fire on this shore at night," Winston said, pointing to a charred place among the rocks, "but it evidently aroused no one's curiosity. It is well for Peggy and for me that I studied woodcraft when I was a Boy Scout in England and learned to make a fire without matches," he told them as they retraced their steps to the side of the island on which their host and wee hostess lived.

* * *

In the meantime the three lads from Drexel Academy were slowly cruising along the coast. Every now and then they would go as close as they dared, and all three, making megaphones of their hands,

would shout: "Virginia Davis! Barbara Wente!" over and over, but only echoes from the cliff replied. Occasionally a sea bird startled by their cries would circle about them, but no other living thing was seen.

"This is a lost hope," Benjy said, at last. "We have been cruising up and down this coast for two hours, in fact, nearly three, and so we might as well give up."

"The wind is getting pretty brisk and since it is from the sea, we'll have to tack out quite a bit to make the port we started from," Jack said. He then pushed the rudder handle and the bow swung into the wind.

"We'll have to go at least a mile out to sea," Dick agreed, "if we make the fisherman's dock on one tack."

"That's hard luck," Benjy spoke regretfully. "I hate to waste the time, but of course we must get the old boat back. Make the best speed you can, boys."

Dick and Jack were experienced sailors, while Benjy, desert-born, knew nothing whatever of the management of a boat.

For a long half hour they scudded in silence which was suddenly broken by an exclamation from the boy at the rudder. "Hi, you, Ben! Look over to starboard. What's that red thing bobbing up and down."

"Looks like a bottle floating this way. Turn about, can't you, so that we can sail close enough to pick it up?"

"I'm afraid I can't make it, old man," Jack replied. "If we swing that way an inch more we'll lose the wind out of our sails."

They were scudding away from the bottle when Benjy shouted excitedly: "Never mind if we do lose headway, I want to get that bottle. I believe that red thing on it is a girl's hair ribbon and I'd never forgive myself if there was a message in it from Babs and the rest of them."

"Well, I'll take a tack that way, if you say so, but of course the bottle can't hold a message from the girls since it is sailing directly in from somewhere out at sea. More than likely it was dropped from a ship in distress."

"Well, even so. It's up to us to get it, whoever set it afloat." Benjy is right," Dick agreed. "There, now we're making straight for it."

"Hold the boat steady," Benjy called. "I'll lean way over and try to grap it when it's near enough."

But holding the boat steady with the sails flapping in an ever-increasing wind proved to be an impossible feat.

"Pull on the sheet! Quick!" was Jack's sharp com-

mand. "We're bearing right down on it. Gee whiz! We hit it! Now, like as not, it's broken."

But the bottle, evidently unharmed, slid around the boat and bobbed up on the other side. Making a lunge which nearly resulted in his falling overboard, Benjy secured the prize, and holding it up, he could plainly see the birch bark inside which he was convinced held some message.

"There's only one way to it," Dick told him, "that's to break the bottle."

This was easily done and the piece of birch bark fell out.

The three boys crowded round to try to decipher the blurred pencil marks.

"It's unbelievable!" Benjy stood up and shading his eyes, gazed out toward the bank of mist which nearly always hung like a curtain between the mainland and the island.

Then, with a whoop of joy, he shouted, "Look yonder! A fishing launch is coming in. Let's hire one of the men to sail The Nancy back to its dock and the other to take us over to the island."

"The very thing!" As he spoke Jack stood up and waved his coat. The other boys did likewise, then, when they were sure that they had attracted attention, they beckoned and shouted. The two fishermen in

the launch, believing that the boys were in trouble, decided to change their course, and so before long, they were within speaking distance. Upon hearing the story, they readily agreed to comply with the boys' plans and fifteen minutes later, the launch was headed directly for the bank of mist, while the Nancy was tacking leisurely toward the mainland. At that same moment, the young people on the island had made an exciting discovery.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN INDIAN MOUND.

WHEN the girls with Winston and Peggy had watched the bottle until its gleaming red sails could no longer be seen, they had retraced their steps toward the other side of the island.

"I feel sure that we are to be rescued before many moons," Eleanor said.

"That is what Indians called a month. I go you one better than that," Betsy put in. "I'll say that we'll be back in Vine Haven before many suns."

"Speaking of Indians," Virginia remarked, "Winston, do you suppose there ever were Indians on this island?"

"I think so," the lad replied. "In fact, one day when I was exploring, I came upon a mound which I am confident was an Indian grave. I have often thought I would like to go back there and dig into it. Some tribes, as you know, buried really interesting things with their dead, believing that the departing soul would have use of them in the world to which they were going."

"Where did you find that mound, Winston? Could we visit it now?" Eleanor inquired. "We haven't anything else that needs doing, have we?"

"No, indeed," the lad replied. "We have fish enough for supper and for breakfast, too, for that matter."

As he talked, he led the way toward the densely wooded hill that rose in the middle of the narrow, though long island. On the top, under old gnarled pine-trees, they came upon the mound which Winston had seen on a former visit. It did indeed look like an Indian grave.

"I wish we had shovels and things," Betsy said.

"I'll tell you what!" Eleanor exclaimed. "Let's pretend we are Indians, really, and, of course, they would have had no utensils or implements. Now, if they wanted to dig, what would they do?" "They would find rocks, perhaps, that had been hollowed

out by waves," Margaret had just said, when Winston leaped up from the ground where he had been kneeling and gave a whoop, as an inspiration came to him. "You girls wait here," he said, "while Peggy and I run down to our hut. We have dozens of huge shells. We'll each bring back as many as we can carry. They'll make the best kind of trowels."

Away the sister and brother ran and during their absence, the girls knelt on the dry pine needles to inspect more closely the Indian grave.

"I wonder how long it has been here. Years and years I suppose," Eleanor said.

"If we did find interesting relics in this mound, to whom would they belong?" Megsy inquired.

"Why to Winston and Peggy, I should think, since they first discovered it."

"I don't know when I've met a boy I like better," Eleanor said, seating herself on the ground. "I felt right at once as though I had known Winston for a long time. Don't you like him, Virginia?"

"Yes, indeed." The older girl rising had turned to look toward the mainland. She shaded her eyes and gazed into the gleaming sunlight, but she could not see far because of the cloud of mist.

"A boat might be nearly here and we could not

see it," Eleanor began, when a shout announced that Winston and Peggy were returning.

The shells were indeed large and strong. One was given to each girl. Then Winston suggested: "Suppose we work in relays. In that way we will not all be tired at once."

"You and Virginia may be the first relay," Betsy said generously. The older girl laughed. "No, indeed, I know you are just wild to begin to ferret out the mystery. Suppose you and Eleanor begin. Five minutes will be allowed each pair of diggers. Megsy, since you have a wrist-watch, you may be time-keeper."

But many a five minutes had passed before much of the earth had been removed. It was decided, because of his superior strength that Winston might have a turn all by himself until he announced that his arm was tired. It was then that some real headway was noticed. However, it was Eleanor who was digging when a hard object was struck. Great was the excitement as they all crowded around. "Maybe it's Indian crockery. You know what vessels and things were buried in their graves."

"Be careful how you hit it, Betsy, for if it is crockery, it will surely break," Sally warned. But the something which they were rapidly uncovering

did not resemble anything which Indians were known to make.

"It's a small copper chest," Winston announced at last.

Betsy sprang to her feet and leaped about joyfully. "Oh, ho, ho!" she cried. "This is Stevenson's Treasure Island, I do believe."

Winston's eyes glowed with excitement as he looked over at Eleanor, who was also digging. "I do believe Betsy is right. Of course it isn't *that* Treasure Island, but smugglers, at some time, may have buried this here."

Having removed the hard packed dirt from the top of the box, the lad tried to pry it out but it was too firmly imbedded. "We'll have to be patient and dig some more," he said. "Although the boy's fingers were almost numb from holding the handless implement for so long, he was so eager to unearth the find, that he did not want to rest, but Virginia begged him to let her take his place for a time.

"All righto!" he sang out as a new thought suggested itself to him. "And I'll break a strong staff from a tree and make a lever out of it." He leaped away to accomplish this, and while he was gone, the girls redoubled their efforts.

"I never in all my life dreamed that such exciting

"Girls! Girls! call Winston. The cover moved ever so slightly."

(*Page 231*) (*Virginia's Adventure Club.*)

adventures ever really happened," Betsy was saying, when Eleanor cried: "Girls! Girls! Call Winston. The cover moved ever so slightly. I believe if he has found a stout stick, he could pry it off."

The lad came bounding back when he heard a chorus of excited voices shouting his name. Wedging his sharp pointed stick under the cover of the box, he soon pried it lose. Together he and Eleanor lifted it. There were two leather bags in the box and they were so heavy that it was with difficulty that the lad lifted them.

On the inside of the copper lid was inscribed the name of the one who had buried the treasure. The girls were sure that they knew what they were to hear before Winston could decipher it.

"It's your grandfather Burgess' buried fortune," Betsy told Eleanor, but before that maiden could reply, an exclamation of amazement from the lad caused them all to turn in his direction. "Eleanor," he cried, "is *your* name Burgess? Why didn't you tell me before? My mother's maiden name was Dorinda Burgess."

And then, as though that were not enough excitement for one hour, there arose below them on the beach, a loud hallooing. Winston leaped to a spot where he could look down. "Girls," he cried, but

there was no need to call, for they were closely following him. "There is a launch anchored just beyond the shoal and three boys have come ashore in a dory."

"It's Benjy and two of the boys from Drexel Academy!" Barbara whirled to hug Margaret. "Oh, girls, aren't you glad we were shipwrecked, now that we are to be rescued?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN WHICH MANY THINGS HAPPEN.

ALTHOUGH Winston was indeed glad that he and his small sister were being rescued, his heart was too full of anxiety concerning his mother's fate to really share in the hilarious rejoicing of his companions. Not wishing to depress them by reminding them of his possible loss, he smiled as cheerfully as he could, whenever he was addressed, but Virginia noticed that he held little Peggy close to him during the sail to the mainland.

Luckily the wind was back of them and they did not need to delay for frequent tacks. While the other girls were telling the story of their unexpected voyage to their three rescuers, Eleanor managed to

find a seat near Winston. She lifted shining eyes to her new-found cousin, but in them tears slowly gathered. Then quietly she told him the story of her mother's long search for her sister Dorinda. "I cannot understand," the lad seemed perplexed. "I know that my mother repeatedly sent letters to a sister in America, but the name on the envelope was never Burgess."

"That is true," the reply was sadly given. "Aunt Dorinda never knew that my father was not—well, not what a husband should be to the best woman in the world. It was because of his unworthiness that Mumsie took back her maiden name."

"I remember that my mother wrote everywhere that she could possibly hope to find her sister, but the letters were always returned, unopened. Sometimes on them would be stamped: 'Name not in directory,' and so my mother, grieving over the loss of my father, was even more saddened by the fear that she had also lost her sister. Broken in health and with very little money, we went to England where I tried to work a small farm. I learned a lot about it, and liked it tremendously, but mother longed to get back to her home country. It was at that time that my father's brother sent us money for our passage, asking us to visit him until my mother had

regained her strength. The very thought that she might hear what had happened to her sister made it possible for mother to undertake the voyage, but now—" The lad, visibly affected turned away. Eleanor slipped her hand over his.

"Dear cousin," she said softly, "I have a feeling, deep in my heart, that somehow, someway, all is to be well. Let's keep hoping until we know."

They could say no more as the mainland dock had been reached. Virginia had glanced at Winston and realizing that he and Eleanor wished to converse alone, she had kept the others interested and occupied. Then as they all landed, Betsy Clossen exclaimed: "Why, if here isn't that little red feather that led us into all this—this—what *shall* I call it?"

"A very wonderful something." It was Eleanor who spoke. "For, because of it, my dear cousins have been rescued."

"I'm glad it all happened just as it did," Virginia said. Then turning to Benjy and his two companions, she held out her hand, adding: "I'm going to be a self-appointed spokesman and thank you on behalf of us all for your great kindness. Will you return with us to Vine Haven?"

"Rather, I am going to suggest that you accompany us to the village which is reached much more

easily, as the road beyond the cliff leads directly there, and then we will take the next train back to Drexel, while you can telephone for the school bus to come after you."

This really excellent suggestion was acted upon. When the station was reached, Benjy suggested that Winston accompany the three boys. One of them, Jack Dennison, being the same build as the stranded youth, quietly offered to loan him clothes until he could procure for himself the things he needed.

"From there," he told Eleanor, "I shall go directly to Boston in search of my mother as that was the port where the boat hoped to put in to await calmer seas."

"And little Peggy shall go to Vine Haven with me." The small girl looked up happily and nestled confidingly close to her new found relative.

It was all very mysterious to her but she accepted Eleanor unquestioningly since her wonderful brother did.

Luckily the train was drawing into the station at the moment of their arrival and so the four boys swung on up to the platform and almost before the girls realized, they found themselves alone. Virginia at once called up Mrs. Dorsey, who burst into tears when she learned that her charges were safe and for

several seconds she could not make herself understood.

After that, in an unaccountably short time, or so it seemed, Micky appeared with the bus. The little fellow was overjoyed to see his beloved Babs once again. When the school was reached, the door was thrown open and the stout and motherly Mrs. Dorsey ran down the steps, her apron flying, her arms outstretched as though she would gather them all into her warm embrace. "You darlings!" she sobbed, as she held close those who were nearest. "This is the happiest moment, I guess, in the long life of me. I was so dreading that I'd have to tell poor Mrs. Martin that I hadn't been worthy of the trust she'd put in me." Then, wiping her eyes with her apron, she added: "But do come in, you poor tired-out creatures. I've been running around ever since you telephoned, trying to get you up a good hot meal, and, as soon as you're washed and ready, it will be the same. Not washed, of course," the kind woman smiled through the tears that still came, "but anyhow 'twill be ready."

Peggy, she had taken as a matter of course, not stopping to ask or wonder how Eleanor Burgess had procured a little cousin on her strange voyage.

The girls started away and had reached an upper

landing when a flustered and visibly excited housekeeper reappeared at the foot of the stairs. "Oh, Eleanor Burgess," she exclaimed. The girls all turned to listen. "There's been a phone call coming for you every little while. It's long distance and nobody but the operator speaks, so I don't know who 'tis that's wanting you. Fearing it was your mother, I didn't say anything about your being lost. I just said call later, which I'm expecting they will."

"Thank you, Mrs. Dorsey." Then Eleanor turned glowing eyes toward her friends. "Mother has come back even sooner than she had expected, I do believe, and probably she is sending for me to come to her in Boston. Oh, how glad I am that she knows nothing of our recent adventure."

"You'll be glad to see her, dear, won't you?" Virginia kissed the flushed cheek of her friend. Then they went to their rooms to change their dresses. Eleanor hardly knew what to put on little Peggy.

The queer costume of the child had escaped Mrs. Dorsey's notice since Betsy Clossen, who was the smallest among them, had put her sweater coat over the little one's shoulders and it reached nearly to her knees.

"I have a dress in my trunk that I long ago outgrew," Betsy said, "but I liked it so much I have

kept it. I believe it can be taken in with safety so that at least it won't slip off."

A merry time the room-mates had washing and dressing the little maid. They did not attempt to take the tangles out of the child's hair. "It will have to be cut off, but we can't do that now," Eleanor said, and, even as she spoke, a familiar gong sounded through the corridors.

"Good! My, but I'm hungry." Betsy skipped to the door and flung it wide open. Outside the other girls waited and then down the front stairs they ran in a manner that was never seen at Vine Haven when Miss King awaited them in the lower hall.

Eleanor glanced toward the telephone as they passed, wondering when it would ring again. They were descending the stairs to the dining-room when she heard its summons. "Eleanor, come quick!" Betsy shouted from the end of the line, "It's probably for you!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A HAPPY REUNION.

THERE was no need to call twice for Eleanor bounded back and took down the receiver. The girls had returned to the main corridor and waited eagerly.

They heard a glad cry which assured them that it was indeed Mrs. Burgess, but they were surprised at Eleanor's first remark. "Mother, are you really home? I mean here at grandfather's place? Oh, I can't wait to get there, and you have a surprise for me? Well, then, I have a surprise for you! Yes, yes, Mumsie. I'll come at once. I'll get Micky to take me."

When the girl turned toward them, Virginia thought she had never before seen a more glowing face. Eleanor tried to speak but choked and holding out her arms ran to Virginia and clung to her, sobbing. Then she reached out a hand and drew the wondering Peggy to her.

At that moment the mystified Mrs. Dorsey appeared at the head of the basement stairs. "Girls, why don't you come? Your lunch will be that cold, 'twill be no good at all, and I took such pains making what I knew you'd be liking."

"Eleanor dear, come down with us. You and Peggy are just as hungry as we are, and, after lunch, if Mrs. Dorsey is willing, I will accompany you in the bus."

Reluctantly the girl permitted herself to be led to the dining-room but she was so excited, so eager to be gone that she could hardly eat, but Virginia knew

that Peggy could, and she did, though she kept watching her new cousin with big round eyes. Strange things were surely happening and there was a vague feeling of lonesomeness in her heart. She had never before been separated from Winston, her brother.

After the rather hurried meal, Micky, whom Babs had notified, drove up with the bus and Virginia accompanied Eleanor and Peggy. The other girls agreed that Virg was the right one to go. "For who can be a greater comfort if the surprise should be a sad one?" Megsy asked them.

But it was not. It was so wonderful a surprise that it was almost hard to believe that it had really happened.

When the bus stopped in front of the side door, Eleanor suggested that Peggy stay in it with Virg, while she went alone to greet her mother. When she bounded up the steps, the door opened and there stood, not the frail little woman who had set sail with the doctor's wife a few months before, but one who radianted health and an inward joy. Instantly Virginia, watching, knew that the surprise was not to be a sad one, and how glad she was. Then the door closed, but almost at once it opened again and a most excited girl leaped down the steps and raced

out to the bus. "Oh, Virg!" Eleanor cried. "Aunt Dorinda is found. Doctor Warren found her in a hospital where she had been taken when the boat went to pieces right in the very harbor and everyone was rescued. Oh, how I wish Winston were here, but I'll telephone to Drexel before he can go to Boston. There isn't another train out until night."

Catching Peggy by the hand she ran with her into the house. Then a few moments later returned, asking Virg if she would come in and meet her mother and Aunt Dorinda.

"Not to-day, dear. Shall you return with us now or would you like to stay over-night with your mother?"

"I'll stay until Mrs. Martin comes back," Eleanor said. "Phone me, won't you, the minute she returns?"

Virginia agreed that she would, and then she bade Micky drive back to the school. The girls were waiting eagerly on the wide front porch and when they heard what the surprise had been, the irrepressible Betsy led the school cheer. "My, but I'm glad! I shall treasure that red feather as long as I live!" she ended, by saying.

"Maybe some time in the future it may lead you on another adventure," Babs said.

"Who knows?" Betsy beamed. "But next time I

hope there will be a mystery for me to solve."

"Poor little detective who never succeeds," Babs teased.

For once Betsy did not retort, but she determined that before many moons she would unearth a mystery that she could solve, nor was she wrong, though the nature of it the merry little maid did not even guess.

* * *

A week later Vine Haven Seminary had settled back into its usual routine. Mrs. Martin had returned rested and enthusiastic over the interesting trip that she had taken. Of course Mrs. Dorsey had thought right to tell all that had happened, and even offered to resign if Mrs. Martin felt that she had been at fault, but the principal, who was always just, assured the anxious matron that she was in no way at fault nor indeed did she blame the girls.

Eleanor had not appeared until the morning when the first classes were to report and then she told her friends how overjoyed Winston and his mother had been to be reunited. "And the best of it is that the two sisters are going to stay on grandfather's place and make a real home of it, and Winston's dream has come true for he has a farm of his own to do with whatever he wishes, and, as for Peggy,

next year she is to come to Vine Haven with me."

The girls were all unusually studious during the remainder of May, for were not the final exams near at hand, and Virg had added to her other duties, the pleasure of editing the last Manuscript Magazine for the year.

And yet there were hours, and many of them (usually at night when the other girls were asleep), that she lay, watching the stars, and yearning for the loved ones on the far away desert. "Would she find any changes?" she wondered.

CHAPTER XXX.

BETSY'S SECRET GOAL.

"GIRLS! News! News! Great news!" It was Margaret Selover who skipped into the corner room occupied by Virg and Eleanor Burgess.

Mrs. Martin just told me that Eleanor Pettes' college closes a few days before Vine Haven and she has written that she will come for our final exercises. She's ever so eager to see our last Manuscript Magazine of the year."

"Well, it's to be a spiffy one all right. My name is going to be in it."

"Oh, Betsy, I don't believe it! Virg, she's storying, isn't she? You never would print one of her doggerels, would you?"

The editor of the magazine laughed and actually winked at Betsy. With a chuckle that little maid asked: "Won't Margaret be the most surprised person in this school when she does see the reason for my name being in the bang-up last edition?"

"Maybe Virg is starting a joke column and is permitting Betsy to conduct it." This from Babs who had followed Margaret into the room.

"Me? I'm no joker. I'm the most serious-minded pusson at Vine Haven." Then tantalizingly, "If you tried till doomsday, you couldn't guess why my name is to be featured in the biggest and best Manuscript Magazine of the year, so you might as well devote your thoughts to something easier."

"Very well." Megsy looked inquiringly at Virginia. "Have you heard from Winona? Is she coming here to be ready to go West with us?"

The girl addressed shook her head. "No, I'm sorry to say. Winona writes that the practical nursing courses will not be completed until the last of June and of course we cannot wait for her three weeks after our school closes. But Winona is quite

capable of crossing the country alone. Anyone of us is now, I feel sure."

"Virg," Babs exclaimed, "what wonders you've worked with Sentimental Sally! She even looks different someway. Yesterday, just to tease, one of the girls who has a brother over at Drexel told her that Donald Dearing has returned to that Military Academy and that she had invited him to come to our closing party. A few months ago Sally would have acted silly, giggled or simpered or something, but instead she merely smiled indifferently and went right back on with her reference work. I was in the library at the same table and that's how I happened to hear it."

"There's a lot to Sally. Her mother cares only for society and her chief desire it would seem is to have her daughter learn how to be idle gracefully. I don't know what she will think when she finds that Sally has actually chosen a goal toward which she is working. She plays beautifully on the harp and since she will not need to earn money, she is going to plan to devote part of her time to giving harp concerts in hospitals, old folks' homes and places where her music will bring the most happiness." Virginia was proud of and pleased with her protege, it was quite evident.

"Betsy, you are our incorrigible member," Megsy said to tease. "Virginia has failed to influence you for good. You're the only one in the study club who hasn't been inspired to choose a goal or try for the Honor Roll."

"Me? Goodness no. I don't want to sprout wings yet. But if you'll produce a deep-dyed mystery of some kind, I'll show you what I can do."

Barbara laughed. "You remind me of the tramp who offered to shovel snow in the summer to pay for a meal." Then catching hold of Margaret's arm, she added, "Two bells. Time for you and me to go to French. Fare-thee-well till lunch."

When Virginia and Betsy were alone, the latter maid grinned her delight, but suddenly there was an anxious cloud on her piquant face. "Virg," she said, "do you think I can make it? This Latin translation is powerfully hard." She had taken a book from her blouse where it had been hidden while her tormentors had been in the room.

"I'm sure of it!" Virginia's voice expressed her confidence. "I have a free hour now and we'll go over it together."

The weeks that followed were indeed busy ones. Each of the older girls in Madame La Fleur's sewing class was to make her own dainty white dress for the

closing party, and, at almost any free hour groups of merry maids could be seen gathered first in one room and then in another hemming, basting and ruffling, for those little "French gowns," as Babs called them, were to be made every stitch of them by hand.

"This would have been jolly fun," Betsy declared, "if it wasn't for the fact that final exams are hanging so heavily over our heads."

Virg, of course, solved this problem by suggesting that one girl read history while the others sewed. This they did and at the end of each chapter the book was passed to someone else that the former reader might not lose too much time from the making of her gown.

"I'm glad it's the history of France," Sally remarked during a pause in which the book was being passed from one to another. "That seems sort of appropriate since we are making French dresses. Madame La Fleur even had the material sent from her brother's shop in Paris."

"It doesn't look like mere muslin does it?" Babs held up a shimmering length to let the sun shine through it. "It's heaps more like gossamer, but Dicky, do go on with the reading."

"Very well. This chapter is called 'Reaction and New Discontent.' 'It was said of the Bourbons that

they never forgot anything and never learned anything.' "

"This is rather paradoxical, isn't it?" Margaret began, when Betsy teasingly interrupted. "Whizzle, Megsy! What a word! You certainly have learned something and didn't forget it either. Why if I could say such a long one as that right off easy, I'd think I was ready to graduate."

"Hush, Bets. Just because you aren't trying for the Honor Roll is no reason why the rest of us don't want to study." Sally spoke her thoughts these days as independently as did the others.

Betsy flashed. "Just for that I'm going to finish the paragraph." Which she did, rattling off information about Louis eighteenth in a manner to make several of the girls present open their eyes in amazement, but before they could declare that they believed Betsy had a book hidden in her sewing and was reading it, a gong called them to another task.

Later that day when Virginia and Betsy were having one of their secret sessions at translating Latin, the younger girl chuckled. "That was a close call. I almost gave away the fact that I have actually been studying. That never would do, if it's to be a grand sweep-'em-off-their-feet surprise."

Virginia laughed. "Betsy, you are as refreshing

as one of our desert winds, after a sultry day, when it blows down from the snowy-topped mountains. Often I go up on the mesa, when it begins to blow, and take gloriously deep breaths. They make one feel like a new being."

Betsy had closed her book and was sitting with an almost pensive expression on her usually merry face. "It must be wonderful to have a real home," she said. "Dad and I haven't had one for years, not since mother left. We live in hotels, you know, wherever Dad is sent. Sometimes it's in one big city and sometimes another. At first I thought it was great, but after the novelty wore off I was desperately lonesome. Then Dad sent me here to boarding school. Of course I love it, with all of the girls for make-believe family, but, when vacation time comes and you are all talking of going home, I do wish that Dad and I had one, somewhere. This summer, though, will be better than most, for I have a very nice aunt who has invited me to visit her and her two small boys at their summer home on the sound."

Then springing up, the impulsive girl gave her companion an unexpected hug. "Virg, you're a dear," she exclaimed. "I don't in the least like the thought that after the closing party I shall never, never see you again."

The older girl was touched, for there were actually tears in the eyes that were usually laughing. "I'll play prophet," she said gaily. "I will prophecy that you will visit us all out on the desert some day. Perhaps next year or the year after."

"Virg," the eyes now were glowing, "if such a thing could happen, I just know that I would live happily ever after."

As we know, strange things do happen.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BETSY SPRINGS A SURPRISE.

THE dresses were all made and ready to be donned. One by one the girls had descended to the laundry and under the skillful supervision of Delia, the marvels of ruffly whiteness had been pressed. They were then laid on the beds in the room of each seamstress and all of the particular friends were invited in to admire. Notwithstanding the fact that with very little difference, the dresses closely resembled each other, individual taste had been displayed in sashes and hair ribbons. Betsy's cherry-red sash with long fringed ends was indeed "adorable," as the girls all said, and Babs was, of course, to wear blue, the color of her

eyes. Dicky always wore yellow, when a choice of color was permitted. Virg had never had a sash, and, as she was not going to the city to make purchases before returning home, she had decided to be content with a muslin belt.

Betsy, however, had been sent for by her Dad, who was to be in Boston over the week-end. When she returned she called a meeting of the Study Club and presented Virginia a long box, and when that puzzled maiden opened it, there lay the softest, silkiest sash and butterfly bow for her hair. It was the color of lilacs and a delicate fragrance drifted up from its folds when the delighted girl lifted the sash and placed it about her waist.

"You like that color, don't you, Virg?" Megsy asked. "I was sure that I had heard you say that you did."

"Yes, indeed. I think it is the sweetest! I had a little lilac bush out on the desert. Mother had planted it and after she left I nursed it and watered it, but once when I was away Uncle Tex forgot, and it dried up and died. It had very few flowers, but I loved their color and fragrance." Then as a card fluttered out, Virginia read: "To our beloved president from the members of the Saturday Evening Study Club."

"Girls," Virg exclaimed, "I don't know what to say to thank you."

"That's the way we feel about all the things you have done for us." It was Sally who spoke.

"Why, I haven't done anything for any of you," Virginia declared, adding, with an almost tremulous smile, "except love you."

"That's it," Margaret slipped an arm about her adopted sister. "You know 'love sacrificeth itself.' "

"Girls, please don't put me on a pedestal. You have helped me just as much as I hope that I have helped you."

"If only we have all passed our exams fairly creditably," Dicky Taylor began when Betsy interrupted, her eyes shining: "Girls, hark! The bus is coming! Eleanor Pettes will be on it. She mustn't get as far as the front door and not have us there to greet her."

Down the wide stairway the merry maids trooped, chattering gaily, for, as this was the last day of school, all silence rules had been banished. The bell was ringing, and Delia had appeared, but Babs beckoned her to wait and let them open the door.

"Let's all pounce out on her and shout 'welcome belovedest,' " Betsy suggested.

"All right. One—two—three—" The door was

flung open, Betsy and Babs were about to throw their arms about the girl who was expected to be on the porch, but they stopped, and their outstretched arms dropped to their sides, for the visitors were lads from Drexel Academy. Benjy Wilson, his two best friends Jack Dennison and Dick Beardsley, while the fourth was Donald Dearing. They were in their dress uniforms and looked very fine indeed. The amazed faces of the girls puzzled the lads until the impulsive Betsy exclaimed, "Oh, we almost hugged you! We were expecting Eleanor Pettes. We were sure we heard the school bus."

"So you did! We came up from the station on it. There was a girl on the bus, but she saw some of her friends in the orchard and so she joined them." Then Benjy hurried on to explain, "Of course we know that it's much too early for the party guests to arrive, but if we may, we would like to speak with Mrs. Martin. Then we are going back to town, and return at the proper time."

The principal received the lads in her office and the girls raced out to the orchard, where they found the former editress of the Manuscript Magazine, surrounded by seniors. She turned with outstretched hands to greet the younger girls, and Betsy bubbling-

ly related the narrow escape the boys had had from being pounced upon.

"I can't imagine why they came so early. I'm just ever so curious to know why they wanted to see Mrs. Martin," Babs said when Sally whispered, "See, there they go now. How straight and nice they look in their dress uniforms."

Virginia noticed with pleasure that Sally had said this in the same way that any of them would have done. She no longer simpered, and, in fact, the girls had forgotten that they had ever called her "Sentimental Sally."

"We're ever so excited," Margaret confided to Eleanor Pettes as they all turned to go in to the school. "In less than half an hour we are to gather in the gym for assembly. Miss Torrence wanted to wait until you arrived, and then the last Manuscript Magazine of the year is to be read aloud."

Babs skipped up to say, "Betsy insists that her name is to be in it, but we are sure that she is joking. Composition isn't her best subject."

But a surprise awaited them.

There was a flutter of excitement evident among the 45 girls who were gathered in assembly just as the clock told the hour of three. Dean Craig, who had accompanied the boys to Vine Haven, was the

only outsider who had been invited to the reading. He sat with Mrs. Martin and the other teachers on the raised platform at one end of the long hall.

Miss Torrence rose.

"How young she looks today," Bess whispered to Megsy. "Sometimes she seems real old and wise, but in that flowered muslin she looks like a senior instead of a——"

"Sh! Miss Torrence is speaking."

"Young ladies," the English teacher was saying, and she smiled on them all, "I want to thank you for your splendid co-operation which has made it possible for us to produce a magazine of unusual excellence. Too, I am sure that you will wish to express your gratitude to Dean Craig, who has had his boys print fifty copies that you may each have one to keep as a memento of this school year which is now closing. In it, on page fifteen, you will find a list of all your names and home addresses. This will enable you to correspond with each other, even though you may not return to this school another year." Miss Torrence paused to take from a table, near, a copy of the magazine. Several of the girls took that opportunity to lean over and whisper, "Betsy, now we know why your name is in."

For reply, that maid wrinkled her pert little nose,

then turned toward the front, for Miss Torrence was again speaking.

"We have with us our former editress, Eleanor Pettes, and, at your request, she will read the opening poem which she wrote in memory of her school days here."

The English teacher seated herself and Eleanor went to the platform. Her rather long poem told of pleasant events and friendships formed in the three years she had spent at Vine Haven, and the girls were all glad that they were going to have a copy of the magazine for their very own.

Eleanor Burgess then read her short story, and one after another of the stories and poems followed, the young authors going to the platform as their turns came.

At last Mrs. Martin rose and said smilingly, "That is all, young ladies, you may now go to your rooms, for I am sure that you will want to rest before dressing for the evening party."

Babs leaned forward to whisper: "There, Miss Betsy, I told you that your name wouldn't be in, that is, not more than any of the others." But Miss Torrence was motioning the girls to remain seated.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Martin," she said, turning toward the principal, "may I detain the young ladies

one more moment? I wish to read one item, which, though neither a poem nor story, is, I am sure, of unusual interest. Five names are to be added to the Honor Roll. These are Betsy Clossen, Sally MacLean, Dicky Taylor, Anne Petersen and Eleanor Burgess."

Such a hand clapping as followed. Then, at a motion for dismissal, the girls thronged around Betsy, Sally and Dicky, congratulating and teasing. Invariably, in response to the astonished inquiries, "How in the world did you manage to do it?" all three replied. "Don't ask us! Ask Virginia!"

"All right. Here is the answer," that maiden smilingly replied. "You chose a definite goal and then kept working straight toward it just as Mrs. Martin has always told us is the only way to attain success."

"Hurrah for us!" The irrepressible Betsy sprang up on a ladder that led to a cross-bar. There, holding by one hand, and waving her cherry red hair ribbon in the other, she recited gaily:

"Three cheers for Virginia Davis,
Who has dragged us along to success.
The very best president there ever was.
Do we love her? Well, I'll say YES!"

Virginia was pleased when her friends all joined in the cheering, and how she wished her brother Malcolm and Uncle Tex could hear it.

"But I'll soon be able to tell them all about it," Virginia thought, with a sudden warm glow in her heart. Then, as the merry throng had started to ascend the basement stairs on the way to their rooms, where they were expected to rest for an hour before dressing for the party, she confided to the girl nearest, "Margaret, just think, in one week you and I will be home on the wonderful desert. Are you glad?"

There was an unmistakable answer in the eyes that were lifted and in the loving squeeze that the older girl felt on her arm, though no word was spoken. Even Virginia did not guess how eager Margaret was to see her guardian, the earnest quiet lad, Malcolm Davis.

At the entrance to Sweet Pickle Alley, Betsy whirled to say: "Sally and I are going to be the belles of the party to-night, so don't anybody dare to speak a loud word for the next hour, being as we are going to take our beauty nap."

"You'll need more than an hour for that——" Bess began teasingly, then she darted for her room, followed by Margaret.

A very unusual silence did settle down on the upper corridor, but it was soon broken by the stealthy opening of a door.

It was Margaret who on tip-toe crossed the narrow hall which the girls called Apple Blossom Lane. Ever so lightly she tapped on the door opposite. If Virginia were really asleep, she could not have heard, but she was awake, sitting in the easy chair close to the open window through which a breeze from the sea was wafting.

"Come in, dear," her smile was welcoming. "I thought you planned taking a nap."

Virginia moved over, for that deep comfortable chair was wide enough for two slender girls. "I knew that Eleanor had gone home," Margaret began, "directly after the reading, and, since you were alone I thought—well, I guess I felt a little home sick. Babs is a dear, but Virg, you and Malcolm are all the real home folks that I have. I hope we'll never be separated again, not even by a narrow hall."

Virginia slipped her arm about her brother's ward and the golden head and the brown rested close together. For a time they were silent, just content to be together. After a time Megsy spoke. "We're not coming back next year, are we?"

"No, dear. I am not. I feel that the home on the

desert needs me. I want you to come, if you wish, but I shall be glad if you are content at V. M. with me."

Impulsively Margaret turned and clung to her friend. "Oh, Virg," she half sobbed, "I don't know why I have doubted. You haven't given me any reason to, but I sometimes thought perhaps you would rather have Eleanor Pettes or someone older and wiser than I am for your very dearest friend. I've tried to be glad but I've been so—so foolishly lonesome."

"Why, little-big sister, I never dreamed that you felt left out. In the very beginning, I would have chosen you for my room-mate, don't you know that dear? But who else would have wanted to room with Winona? No one understands her as I do, and then, there was Babs. She began at once to prattle about your rooming together as you had done the year before."

"Oh, I know I have been silly, and I'm awfully sorry, Virg. It wasn't that I thought you ought to like me best. I don't think I'm anywhere near nice enough for that, and you're heaps wiser, but just the same I wanted to be loved best. It's horribly selfish, isn't it?"

Virginia held her companion in a closer clasp. She

was thinking of the mother and father love that they both of them had lost.

"No, dear, it is not selfish for us to want our sisters and our brothers to love us best and we do, deeply, truly, sincerely." She kissed Margaret and rose, for there had been a sudden stir in the corridors. The hour of rest was over and an excited hum of voices told that the girls were preparing to dress for the party which was one of the great events of the school year.

A merry pounding on the closed door announced arrivals and before Virg could open it, a group of laughing girls burst in uncerimoniously. They were dragging Sally whose wealth of long golden hair had been unbraided and hung to her knees. She was wearing an exquisite pale blue silk kimona embroidered with delicate pink flowers which her doting mother had sent her as a gift from Paris. There were slippers to match.

"Virg," Betsy Clossen cried, "isn't our Sally a picture? If she could appear in that tonight, wouldn't she be the belle of the ball all right?"

"If I had hair like yours Sal, I'd think life was worth living." Dicky Taylor perched on the arm of a chair and looked admiringly at the maid whose cheeks were flushed and whose eyes sparkled. Break-

ing away from her truly admiring tormentors, Sally darted for the door. "I may surprise you and *be* the belle of the ball for all your teasing. Just wait and see."

"Was that a threat?" Betsy began, then chancing to glance at the clock, she sprang up from the window seat, grabbed Dicky and Babs and pushed them toward the door. "Only three-quarters of an hour to dress and if we intend to outshine Sally, we'll have to do a powerful lot of prinking."

Margaret and Virginia left alone, smiled at each other. "What a merry trio Babs, Betsy and Dicky are," Virg said as she let down her own sunny hair and began to brush it.

"Dear," Margaret said, "you've done a good many things this year worth the doing, but among the most lasting in its influence for good, I do believe is the change that you have wrought in Sally. She used to be so self-conscious and simpering; probably because her mother was always asking people if they didn't think she was a beautiful child, but now, when we really were admiring that wonderful hair of hers, she would have like to pummel us."

"She's a dear girl," Virginia agreed, "and I only hope her unwise mother will not be able to undo the good we have done. But do hurry, Megsy, if you

are to compete for the honor of being belle of the ball."

"I plead not guilty. I'm going to vote for you, of course." Then she skipped to her room across the hall, but scarcely had she gone, when Dicky Taylor appeared, dressed in the ruffly white gown but carrying a long pale green hair ribbon. "Oh, I say, Virg," she pleaded, "won't you have pity on a 'pusson' whose fingers are all thumbs? I've tried twenty times to tie a beautiful butterfly bow for my crowning ornament but I simply can't do it."

"Of course I will." Virginia's skillful fingers soon fashioned a graceful bow which she pinned atop of the short dark locks. With profuse thanks, Dicky darted away but almost at once Babs and Betsy appeared. "Oh, I say, Virg, that's being partial. Betsy'll get all the votes just because of that adorable bow. Show us how to make ours."

"Better still, I'll make them!" When the grateful girls were gone, Megsy appeared. "Why, Virg, it's ten minutes to dinner time and you aren't dressed. I was going to ask you to tie my sash, but instead I'm going to help you."

Virginia's toilet was completed just as the supper bell rang. "There's to be a new way to choose the

belle to-night. I wonder what it is to be," Betsy whispered as the excited girls trooped down to the dining room.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BELLE OF THE PARTY.

After dinner the girls flocked to their rooms for a last peep into mirrors and a last adjusting of ribbon or ruffle.

The members of The Adventure Club were all in Dicky Taylor's room, when Cora and Dora Crowell darted up from the lower corridor and bouncing into "The Sign of the Tea Kettle," they closed the door and looked around beamingly.

"We've found out about it," Cora began.

"And we thought we'd be the first to spring it. We know you are just dying of curiosity," Dora seconded.

"They've all come and my, don't they look handsome, though? Dean Craig just ushered them into the library."

"But what we don't know is what's in the boxes that they gave to Delia. She took them right into Mrs. Martin's office."

"Girls, you make me dizzy. Begin at the beginning. What have you found out?" Dicky inquired.

"The way the belle of the party is to be chosen. Instead of voting for the most popular girl as we did last year, we are to vote for a boy to lead the grand march and he is to choose the belle." Dora was much excited. She was far more interested in having been the first to hear the new plan than she was in the plan itself.

"That's a spiffy idea!" It was of course Betsy who had spoken.

"Babs and I'll vote for Benjy Wilson. I say, girls, I wish you'd all vote for Benjy, then the belle is sure to be chosen from our crowd."

"Out with her," Dicky cried teasingly. "Betsy's trying to influence the vote."

"I'm crazy to know what is in the boxes," Dora chattered on. "One was large and round and there were six smaller ones."

"I'll bet its candy. I hope I'll draw the big one."

"Bets, there's nothing piggy about you, is there?"

"Hark, footsteps approach." Dora peeped out of the partly open door. "It's Miss King! Sh! Don't let on I told."

The instructress of manners and gymnastics ap-

peared, and for once she was actually smiling. After all, even teachers, at times, were human.

"Young ladies, IF you please, form a line in the upper corridor as quickly and quietly as you can that you may not be heard by the guests who have assembled in the library."

The excited girls took their places so softly that not a rustle could have been heard. Their cheeks were flushed, their eyes sparkled and there was not a heart under the pretty white ruffles that was beating normally.

Mrs. Martin in a gray silk gown stood in the lower corridor and the girls courtesied as they passed her. She smiled and nodded in return and in her heart was a warm glow of pride. Mrs. Martin loved her girls, even the most mischevious of them.

The lads in their dress uniforms were standing about the big library which had been cleared of furniture and which had crash on the floor. Miss Torrence and Dean Craig received and introduced, but at first there was a stiffness and shyness evident that these two were at a loss how to overcome. "Suppose we ask our Glee Club to sing," Dean Craig suggested. This was done. Donald Dearing, with a truly beautiful tenor voice, sang the solo parts and a group of lads joined in the chorus.

Then Sally MacLean was asked to play on her harp. She had consented to take part in the program if her harp might be concealed by palms, but there were a few in the big room who stood in such a position that the palms could not hide from them the truly beautiful girl who sat at the golden harp. These were the lads who had just been singing. Donald Dearing, with his arms crossed, watched the all-unconscious girl as she played, and never before had Sally played with such sympathetic feeling. Something in the tenor voice had stirred a responsive chord in her music loving soul and had inspired her.

When the first waltz was played by two of the boys from Drexel on the piano and violin, Sally tried to slip away unobserved, but found Donald waiting for her near the palms. "May I have this dance with you, Miss MacLean?" he asked. Then, as they joined the others, he said softly, "My sister, who left us, was learning to play the harp. You like music, don't you?"

"Yes," the girl replied. "I love it. Next year mother is to take me to Paris that I may study there?"

"Good," the lad replied, brightly. "Then, perhaps, if I may I shall be able to call on your mother and you, for my Dad is still stationed over there and I

am to spend my vacations with him. He wants me to get my training at Drexel, because he did."

Virginia glanced across the room when the dance was over and the young people were seated. In her heart there was a glow of pride for she could not but know her friendship had helped Sally to become the sweetly, sensible girl that she now was, treating her boy comrade in as frank and friendly a manner as she would a girl companion.

Somehow it seemed fitting that Donald Dearing should have the most votes and everyone knew that Sally would be chosen by him as "belle."

Standing at his side, that flushed and happy girl was asked to choose three lassies to follow her in the march while Donald chose their partners.

Then Dora's curiosity was satisfied concerning the content of the boxes.

A large bouquet of orchids and violets was given to Sally and smaller ones to the lucky girls who were chosen as her attendants.

How great was the change in Sally was made evident that night when the guests were gone. "Shall you press the orchids and keep them to remember Donald Dearing?" Betsy inquired as they were preparing for bed.

"No, indeed. I am going to give them to poor

Miss Buell in the morning. She's been sick for two days and she hasn't anything in her room to make it cheerful," was Sally's unexpected reply.

Somehow Betsy couldn't tease, but she confided to Dicky Taylor that she felt in her bones that some day Sally would become Mrs. Donald Dearing.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FAREWELL TO VINE HAVEN.

THE school year was over. Trunks strapped and ready to be taken away were piled high in the lower corridor. Girls arrayed in traveling suits, many of them with hats already on, were hurrying about visiting each other's rooms to say farewell.

"Oh, how I do envy you all," Betsy Clossen declared as she stood by the window watching Babs and Megsy in their last preparations for departure.

"You four girls all going West together with that nice Benjy Wilson as escort. I'd give anything if I could go, too, but Fate is certainly against me."

The usually cheerful Betsy Clossen looked so dismally doleful that Margaret sprang up from the floor where she had been strapping a suitcase and caught the hands of her friend as she exclaimed: "Why,

Betsy, you look as though you were about to cry. What has happened? I thought you had such happy plans for the summer? Aren't you going to that nice aunt's summer home for three months?"

The other girl shook her head. "I did expect to go and I was so happy about it," she replied, "but to-day Mrs. Martin had a long distance telephone message from my uncle. The boys have scarlet fever and the house will be quarantined for at least a month, maybe even longer."

Virginia, who had appeared in the doorway, had heard and she said: "Why, Betsy, that will leave you all alone in this big rambling old house, won't it, for even Mrs. Martin is going and only a caretaker is to remain."

The girl nodded and tears rolled down her cheeks. "Dad would have taken me with him had he known, but he sailed for London last week on business." Then with April-like suddeness, she smiled through her tears and exclaimed with an effort at cheerfulness, "But there, I don't want to sadden you all on this day which has been such a happy one. I suppose it won't be so very terrible when I get used to it. I can read all the books in the library and—and—" the poor girl's lips quivered, and throwing her arms about Virginia, she sobbed, "but worst of all will be

nights without one of you here. I've tried all day to be brave, the way you would have been, Virginia, but I guess we're made of different material."

Virg had been thinking rapidly. "Wait here a moment," she said. "I'll be back in a jiff." Then away Virginia went, leaving her companions to wonder where she was going and why. A moment later she tapped on the office door of the principal. That good woman bade her enter and Virginia said, "Mrs. Martin, would it be possible for Betsy Clossen to visit me on the V. M. Ranch during the month that her aunt's home is quarantined?"

The older woman looked up brightly and picking up a yellow envelope, she exclaimed, "Betsy's aunt just wired me two hundred dollars and asked me to send the little girl to some summer camp where I knew she would be well cared for and happy, but nowhere in the world would Betsy be happier, dear Virginia, than with you." Then the principal glanced at her watch. "Do you think that you girls could help her pack and be ready for the second bus which leaves in one hour?"

"Indeed we can, Mrs. Martin, and thank you ever and ever so much. We all love Betsy and will be ever so glad to have her with us."

When she was alone, Mrs. Martin thought. "Dear

girl, it is her joy to give pleasure to others and it isn't a pose either. It is just Virginia."

The girls were watching the open door when they heard the feet of their returning friend dancing along the corridor.

"Virginia has some good news," Margaret said brightly. "I can tell by the way she is skipping."

It was indeed marvellously good news to Betsy Clossen and to the other girls who were going West. They wanted to dance in a ring around, but Virg laughingly remonstrated. "Take off your hats, Megsy and Babs, and forward march to Betsy's room. We have fifty minutes by the clock to pack her trunk," she commanded.

"You'd better wash your face. It's all tear stains." Babs looked critically at the now fairly beaming Betsy.

"I'll say I'll wash," was the characteristic reply. "Oh, girls, aren't we going to have scads of fun? Of all my maddest, gladdest, never-expected-to-come-true dreams, this is the superlativest." Betsy was getting into her traveling suit with little heed to which button went where. However, so rapidly and skillfully did loving hands help that by quarter to ten they were all in the lower corridor waiting for the second bus.

"Megs, I wish you'd give me the once over," Betsy begged. "I feel sure some of the hooks got into the wrong eyes, and my hair actually feels towseled."

Margaret laughed. "Betsy won't care how her hair looks when she rides bareback out on the desert," she said to Babs.

"Me? Ride bareback? Why, I've never even been on horseback."

"Then you have a new experience ahead of you. I'll prophecy that before a week is out you'll be riding the wildest broncho Malcolm has on V. M." Margaret told her.

Just then the principal appeared and Virginia, stepping from the group, said: "Mrs. Martin, the girls have asked me to tell you that we are most grateful for all that you have done for us during the past year. Babs is coming back, but Margaret and I are planning to remain with my brother." Then impulsively the girl added. "Mrs. Martin, won't you come West some day and visit us?"

In thinking of it afterwards Virginia could only recall that the principal had kissed her with unusual tenderness, then the bus had arrived, the trunk was carried out and the girls were urged by Micky to hurry.

As the two big white horses turned out between

the high stone gates, Virginia looked back at the imposing building. Her mother's wish had been fulfilled. The daughter she so loved had been East to school, and how Virginia hoped that she was now better fitted to fill that loved mother's place in the home that had been so lonely on V. M. Ranch.

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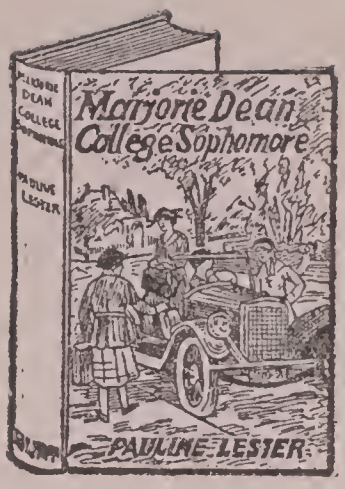

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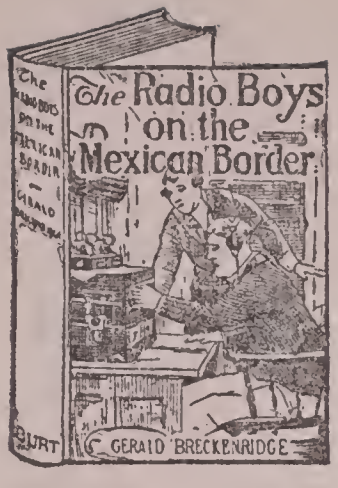

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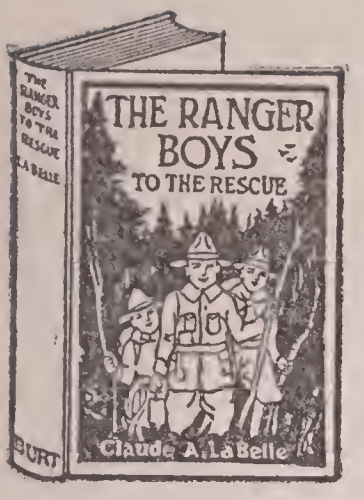

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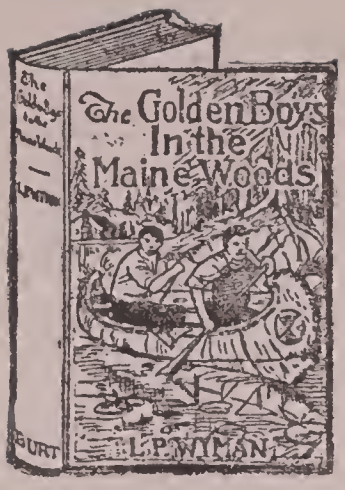

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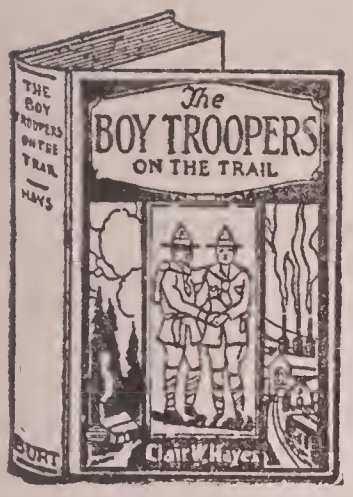

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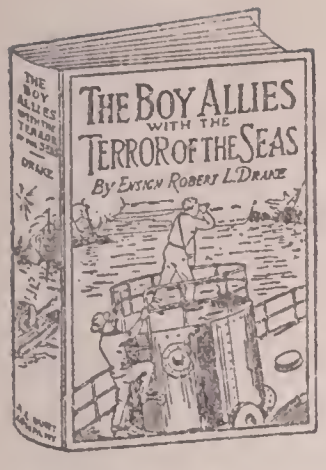

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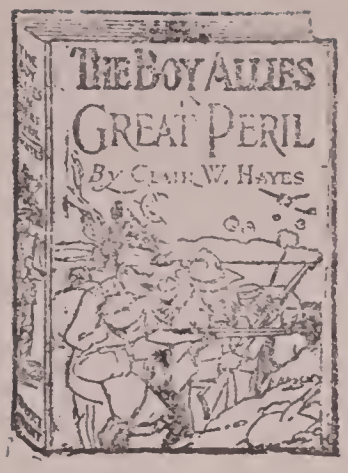

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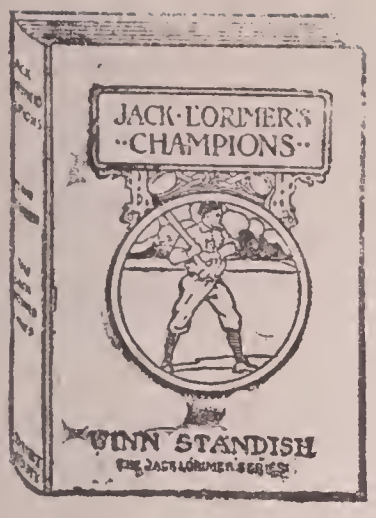

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